

Growing ETCP Certification is vital for the health and safety of the entertainment technology industry



Rick Springfield at the Tulalip Amphitheater in Washington. Rigging, labor, production management, roof, stage barricade, lighting, and video support provided by Pyramid Staging.

Why my perspective?

WHY AM I WRITING MY THOUGHTS and perspective on the ETCP program? Am I a legendary rigger who's been out on

countless tours with all the large bands? Am I the CEO of a national manufacturer or a "big dog" in our industry like Tait Towers or Brown United? Nope. I'm just a stagehand who started working in the early '90s for

several non-union companies. Along the way, I developed my sales skills and worked for PSAV in Hawaii and Washington. From there, I helped open the Rhino Staging's northwest office and served as Director of

Operations/Partner from 2005 – 2008.

My next step involved joining IATSE as a Journeyman in Local #793 and working as an over-hire on the IATSE Local #15 “E” list. Simultaneously, I went back to school and achieved my Masters in Business Administration (MBA) and launched a small staging and audiovisual company, Pyramid Staging & Events, LLC. Pyramid is now entering year six and has found a comfortable niche in the Seattle marketplace.

So, does all of this qualify me as some sort of expert on rigging, certification, training, etc.? Not at all. I’m not even remotely claiming such a thing. I’ve just noticed that most of the ETCP articles are written from such a clinical and technical viewpoint and thought an outside perspective might be interesting as we celebrate ETCP’s 10th anniversary in 2015.

Wild, Wild, West

“... the best way of learning about anything is by doing.” ~ Virgin Records CEO, Richard Branson

While I can certainly understand the sentiment, I’m not sure I want “that” individual hanging lights or speakers above my head. As we all know, the concert and entertainment industry wasn’t known for its rules and strict regulations during its formative years, and my experience in the Pacific Northwest was no exception.

My first shows working as a stagehand occurred in the early ‘90s: Paul McCartney at the Kingdome, The Rolling Stones Voodoo Lounge tour, and several shows the Champs de Brionne Summer Music Theater operated by Bauer-Kinnear Enterprises (BKE). I was a young stagehand in my early 20s. Excited by the prospect of working large concerts and desperately trying to learn how to tie a bowline knot so I could be pressed into service as a high steel climber or rigger at some of the less demanding venues. The job of “rigger” seemed more glamorous or “cool.” It didn’t hurt that it also paid more than the \$7 or \$8 per hour that stagehands



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN PATZER PHOTOGRAPHY

The Pyramid team at Century Link Field the year the Seahawks won the Super Bowl!

made. Looking back at the early ‘90s, it was an exhilarating time period full of discovery.

ETCP makes its way to Seattle

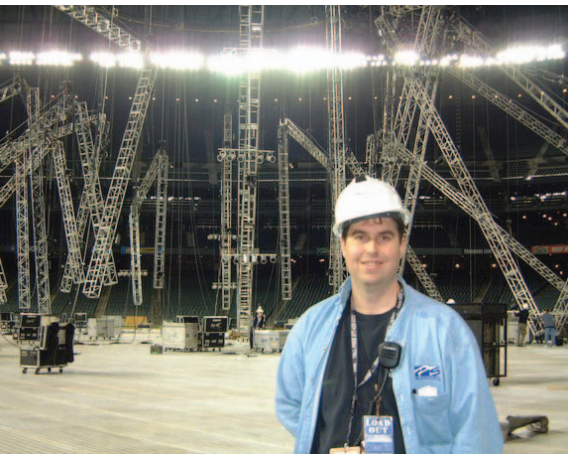
It was early 2006 when I first heard about the ETCP Rigging Certification program. I was serving as the Director of Operations for Rhino Northwest. Rhino Staging was a successful regional non-union labor provider and just beginning to make a strong push towards becoming a national company.

I had overheard a couple of our lead riggers discussing the “ETCP test” and asked naively about this new certification program. Up until this point, I was aware of SPRAT Rope Access training, our internal arena and theater rigger training classes taught by Matt Hudson of Rhino Northwest, and Tomcat Roof Technician training, and some local classes taught by renowned industry veteran Harry Donovan. That was about it.

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None of the venues we worked at required proof of certification and while safety was emphasized and communicated at Rhino, the internal workings and details of rigging remained a mystery shrouded from outsiders. Skills and techniques were preached in hush terms and handed down directly from individual to individual. Riggers were a select breed of employee and their tools and techniques carried more than a little mystique.

What surprised me the most was the immediate push back that I heard from riggers that I truly respected: “It’s just a pen and paper test.” “I don’t need it, I get plenty of work without it.” “John Doe just passed the test and he doesn’t even know how to rig,



Stephen Dilts at WrestleMania XIX, March 30, 2003

all he does is trade shows in a scissor lift.”

Wow. What a backlash. It was confusing. Why were some of the best riggers in our state so openly against or indifferent about this new rigging certification? I’m not talking about second- and third-year riggers just learning rope management. I’m talking about some of the top ten riggers throughout the state that worked every day for a living.

To make matters more complicated, a very well respected rigger and key employee for the Seattle Center and Key Arena went out and earned her ETCP Arena Rigger certification right away. She spoke very highly of the process and tried to encourage others to get organized, track their hours, and begin preparation to take the test. How could one person preach so strongly about the program while her counterparts with similar skills seemed to show zero interest? What was going on? Was the certification process doomed to fail just from apathy?

Competitive advantage and liability

A couple years went by with the occasional rigger earning their Arena certification. (There weren’t as many people trying to get their Theater or Electrician certification up here—or at least, not that I was aware of). The certification process wasn’t taking

the world by storm. None of the venues were requiring ETCP certified riggers and over half of the top ten riggers in our state still hadn’t taken the test. At the same time, the certification process was no longer a mystery. A professional website developed, email and newsletters were sent out. A naïve salesperson like myself could now go online and learn all the details associated with the program, where the tests were held, who had earned their certificates, etc. ETCP was becoming more established and didn’t look to be a “flash in the pan” or going away anytime soon.

Early in 2009, something huge happened in Seattle. The Washington State Trade & Convention Center (WSTCC) changed their rigging rules and mandated that at least one ETCP Certified Rigger was necessary on “all” rigging calls.

Everyone in town was buzzing with the news. “Were there even enough certified riggers in Seattle for this process to work?” “How were they checking certification?” “What about shows scheduled within the next couple weeks?” “Was there any grace period to implementing this process?”

IATSE Local 15 was also now making a push to get their riggers signed up and tested. While I can’t remember the exact number, I think there were upwards of 20 freshly minted IATSE ETCP Arena Riggers in 2010 as a direct result of this push and the developing rules in Washington State. The WSTCC had started the ball rolling by making a simple move to reduce liability and become more accountable for safety. That move had caused a chain reaction. Across town, everyone was looking at their rigging programs and who was certified on their staff. No one wanted to be frozen out of doing corporate shows at the trade center.

Growth and expansion

2013 through the first quarter of 2015 has seen an unprecedented growth in Seattle of both acceptance and technicians becoming ETCP certified. As of this writing, there are 53 ETCP certified riggers or electricians in



Pyramid rigging team installing a Monster Truck show at the Tacoma Dome, January 2015.

Washington State.

While formal policies demanding an ETCP certified head rigger still remain few and far between, the working environment and self-awareness have truly changed. Most northwest companies place value on certification and include several ETCP certified individuals on their staff. I’ve also seen pay rates increase as riggers and roof technicians are rewarded for their study and efforts. This is well deserved and something that we’re proud to spearhead at Pyramid Staging. I wish that I could also say that we’re turning around and selling those talents at a higher rate.

Promoters and venues often still look for the cheapest cost possible while simultaneously talking about safety. We’ve had to internalize those pay increases and cut into profitability. Sometimes, that’s the right thing to do. Safety and accountability are beginning to play key roles in our

industry and additional profits will come in time. Not all clients are simply money driven and cost cutting. One standout, First & Goal, Inc. (Seattle Seahawks organization), has shown a commitment towards safety and quality in the workplace. Over the years, they have paid a little more money to insure experienced riggers are handling their conversions with an eye towards safety.

More and more, clients are beginning to understand the importance of certification. As the economy turns around, the purse straps have begun to loosen and both safety and liability are two major areas getting addressed.

In summary

"A prudent man foresees the difficulties ahead and prepares for them; the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences." ~

Proverbs 22:3

The past 10 years have been a whirlwind

of growth and progress. By banding together, our industry has made significant strides towards uniformity. The verdict is no longer out on the ETCP program. It's a success and has begun to shape our competitive landscape. The future is up to us. And by "us," I mean **all of us**. J. R. Clancy and several other large companies set the stage when they offered to pay for employees and their dealers' employees first time ETCP testing fee or recertification fees.

What can we, as small businesses, do to encourage our employees to get certified? Can we sponsor the costs associated with testing? Can we make a commitment to rewarding those certified with higher pay or more job opportunities? The continued growth of ETCP and the safety of our industry remains centered around those questions.

In the Pacific Northwest, we've decided to make a strong commitment and lead by example. Moving forward, any employees with current ETCP certification will receive

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a \$5 hourly rate increase over their fellow workers. In addition, Pyramid will now join J. R. Clancy and others paying for the first time ETCP testing fee or recertification fees for our employees. We'd like to challenge other small staging, audio-visual, etc. companies to join us in this endeavor. If we all support and insist on the same standards, it will be a level and safer playing field. ■



Stephen Dilts is a serial entrepreneur. He currently serves as CEO/Partner at Pyramid Staging and previously was an owner with Rhino Northwest. Stephen is also a Journeyman with IATSE Local #793 and has recently completed his MBA.

Historic gathering of the renowned riggers!

Convened in the Bay Area of California in early March, friends of Rocky Paulson gathered to celebrate the life of Rocky's beloved wife, Paula, at her memorial service. This illustrious group of world-class riggers came together to support Rocky and joined for a noteworthy photo.



Front row: Joe Branam, Michael Reed, Roy Bickel, Dean Hart. Second row: Orlando Orona, Casey Gibbs, Brent Anderson. Third row: Michael Ohta, Mark Hannon, Tim Boase, Eddie Raymond, Rocky Paulson. Fourth row: Bill Sapsis, Joel Magarian, Ed Kish. Fifth row: G. Anthony Phillips, Chris Schmidt, and Larry Hunter. Top row: Marty Cohen, Jim Jacobs.