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On Solid Ground

H.J. O'Connell, a division of Bird, has been profiled in the latest June edition for Business in Focus Magazine www.businessinfocusmagazine.com :

Moving dirt and pouring concrete may sound simple, but the work of H. J. O'Connell Ltd. is anything but. The company works on all types of infrastructure jobs and site development though its specialties include open-pit mining, the removal of overburden (the plants, rock and soil that lie above the desired mine layer) and the development of hydroelectric sites.

Founded in Montreal by Herbert John O'Connell, for over eighty years the company has worked on many of Canada's largest construction projects. With its specialization in the construction of heavy civil infrastructure as well as work on mines and energy development sites, the company has long been a leading supplier to Canada's resource industries.



It has been involved in some of Canada's most famous energy projects including the massive hydro developments in James Bay, Quebec and Churchill Falls, Newfoundland. The James Bay Project is a series of hydroelectric power stations in northwestern Quebec along the La Grande River. The project is one of the largest hydroelectric systems in the world as the La Grande River watershed covers approximately eleven percent of the total area of Quebec. The Churchill Falls Generating Station is an enormous hydroelectric power station located on the Churchill River in Newfoundland and Labrador. This project was the largest civil engineering build in North America at the time of its construction and remains the second largest power station in Canada, generating an impressive 5,428 megawatts.

H. J. O'Connell has worked on constructing or expanding numerous large-scale mining projects in Quebec and Labrador. The Voisey Bay Nickel Project and the Long Harbour Hydrometallurgical Facility are but two with which the company has been involved. The Long Harbour Facility is bringing nearly \$150 million in work to the company. On mine sites, the company constructs

access roads, removes overburden, builds settling ponds, constructs dams and dykes for the containment of tailings and pours foundations for buildings, mine crushers and pollution control structures.

In addition to roadways servicing remote areas, heavy civil infrastructure including superhighways, highway inter-changes and bridges are also built by the company.

With an increase in the price of iron ore, came a resulting increase in both mining and hydro work in recent years allowing the company to flourish as it operates effectively in both areas. H. J. O'Connell now employs about one hundred and thirty people full time and up to one thousand during the peak construction season. The work season is usually only about six or seven months long, due to harsh weather conditions in winter so having everything meticulously planned and running smoothly is of the utmost importance.

H. J. O'Connell likes to work with the owners of a project from the very beginning. Its ability to plan for every aspect of complicated projects stems from a management team with a wealth of engineering experience. This includes the company president, Brian LeMessurier.

So, what is it that makes a company like this tick? It comes down to a lot more than expertise and experience. To be an industry leader you have to cover all the bases efficiently and effectively beginning with the company culture. At H. J. O'Connell, that means valuing its people, safety and quality work.

The company holds weekly "Toolbox Meetings" to provide a conduit for communication between the company and its workers and make certain that everyone has a thorough knowledge of the common goals. Employees are considered the backbone of the company and it makes sure that everyone has access to management to discuss safety or any other issue.

The company knows that the reason it is able to complete projects on time and within budget is down to the caliber of its employees. H. J. O'Connell is proud of its workforce and focuses on its people and ensuring that they are healthy, safe and motivated.

Earlier this year, the company was awarded The Newfoundland and Labrador Employer's Council Employer of Distinction Award which recognizes employers who place value on the workforce, give back to the community in which it operates and set new standards for excellence in Human Resources. It received the award as it has offered its employees child care benefits, flexibility in relocation and options to fly in and out of remote work areas. It also provides community support in the form of time, money and resources to various charities including the Canadian Cancer Society and Habitat for Humanity.

Construction jobsites are inherently dangerous. The risks are known but difficult to control as the nature of the work means that the surroundings are constantly changing. Risks can come from the potential for electrocution, from being injured by large machinery or from being struck by falling objects. The company's goal is to provide its people with a work environment that is as safe and effective as possible. The company believes that accidents are preventable and strives to achieve zero accident performance. In order to bring about this goal, O'Connell provides employees with rigorous safety training; a yearly review of the safety program is performed in addition to a safety orientation for new employees. Prior to the beginning of any new project, hazard assessments are done. Safety practices are continually reviewed and improved.

As a result of these efforts, the Environment, Safety and Health - Loss Control Program at H. J. O'Connell Ltd. not only meets but frequently exceeds both legislated safety requirements and industry standards. Through speaking engagements, the company has shared with other

employers the success of its program. It has also received recognition from various bodies for the effectiveness of its proactive workplace safety initiatives. One of these was the IOC Concentrated Expansion Project “Safety Contractor of the Month” which was awarded to the company in 2011. This is a testament to its employees for their commitment to safety excellence.

H. J. O’Connell is proud of the many long term associations it has developed in the mining and energy sectors through its history of providing clients with superior workmanship. The relationships with some companies have been ongoing for over forty years. Successful partnerships and joint ventures have also been critical in both facing challenges in the industry and providing future opportunities. Over the years, it has partnered with organizations such as SNC-Lavalin, Borealis Construction Ltd. and Mushuau Innu Construction Inc., combining talents to develop effective solutions.

The nature of the business means responsibility to clients, employees and, increasingly, to the environment. H.J. O’Connell Construction Ltd., recognizing that its construction work has a direct impact on the environment, is committed to a proactive environmental policy that promotes the practice of sustainable development. A more efficient use of resources not only reduces adverse effects on the environment, it’s also sound financially. Where possible, it attempts to reduce or eliminate the impact of waste, emissions and green house gases. Disturbing the environment is unavoidable in construction but the company has designed methodologies that alleviate the impact its projects.

The company has the ability to respond to the demands of major resource construction projects in remote areas throughout Canada. To do this, H. J. O’Connell has a fleet of over four hundred pieces of heavy equipment; its full range of earth moving equipment includes some of the largest off highway trucks in Canada capable of moving millions of tonnes of material per month.

Much of the company’s work is farther north and east, in the area around the Quebec border with Newfoundland and Labrador. While its headquarters remain in Montreal, the company will also travel for large projects to other provinces as it did for a recent job on the Wuskwatim Generating Station in northern Manitoba.

Recently, the company was awarded a bulk excavation and associated civil works contract with Nalcor Energy for the Muskrat Falls Hydroelectric generating station on the lower Churchill River. H. J. O’Connell will remove overburden and do rock excavation of the intake, powerhouse, spillway, separation wall, switch yard and converter stations as well as constructing dams at the site of the future 824 megawatt hydroelectric generating station.

The company has certainly left its mark on the Canadian construction industry as it continually meets and exceeds its clients’ expectations. With its reputation for being both a contractor and employer of choice, it provides a positive and rewarding work environment allowing it attract and retain the finest talent in the market.

“As a company, our calling card is production and customer satisfaction,” reads the company’s website. “We go in, do the job safely, do it efficiently and move on. No hassle to the owner, ever. That’s what we’re about. Due to the fact that we’re able to attract and retain high-quality employees as a result of our safety culture and our overall reputation as an employer of choice, we are confident we’ll be able to continue to do that type of work, and that will keep us in demand and allow us to grow in the years to come.”
