

# GOING DOWN?

## Decline in elevator service linked to changes that put greater onus on building owners for systems upkeep

BY RAY ELEID

Elevator consultants often get asked, "What's wrong with the elevator industry?" It's apparent that changes in the industry have resulted in lower quality of products and services, but no one seems to understand why. Unfortunately elevator companies often take the blame.

In reality, there are many changes that have occurred over the last 20 years that have caused a shift in the way the elevator industry approaches maintenance. Cost pressures, new technology and regulatory reforms have converged to create an environment where building owners and managers bear greater responsibility for the upkeep of these systems.

### RIISING LABOUR COSTS

While the cost of labour has continued to increase, the price of maintenance has either decreased or stayed flat as smaller operators with lower overhead compete with multi-nationals. At the same time, managers of elevator companies are under pressure to keep profits up.

By reducing its number of mechanics, the branch can meet the expected margins by having fewer staff do more work. Elevator mechanics work on routes where they maintain a number of elevators each day or week, so managers eliminate mechanics by increasing the number of elevators on the other routes slightly, distributing them to various remaining routes using a method called "route loading."

As the routes have gotten bigger and bigger, route loading has become difficult to manage as mechanics struggle to keep up with the number of elevators they have to maintain. With shorter and shorter timelines to complete their work as

elevators have been added to their routes, elevator mechanics don't have time to do simple maintenance tasks and rebuild broken components.

### UPSELL RATHER REPAIR

At the same time, elevator manufacturers have changed their systems to further increase revenues. Rather than sending adjusters (or troubleshooters) to sites to assist mechanics with repairs, they started

sending sales associates to upsell a new system or modernization to the building owner. This way the elevator company can make higher revenues from these sales calls.

While this upsell system is lucrative for elevator companies, it has a few downsides for the industry as a whole. For one, the upsell isn't always guaranteed, as some owners refuse to pay for upgrades or for expensive maintenance contracts. This results in a higher demand for



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maintenance-free elevators and flimsy, cheap elevator equipment. For another, rather than perform repairs, mechanics have become more likely to shut down the elevators until the upgrade is performed, resulting in an increase of inoperable elevators.

**CHANGES TO REGULATIONS**

When advanced technology such as machine room-free elevators arrived in Canada, regulators moved away from specifying the frequency of maintenance visits. Instead, regulators gave elevator manufacturers more leeway to determine the maintenance cycles and procedures for new equipment, which was increasingly low-maintenance on the one hand but increasingly sophisticated and unique on the other hand.

To mitigate the potential safety risk this posed to passengers, regulators adopted the Maintenance Control Program (MCP) found in the safety code for elevators and escalators code (AMSE A17.1-2013/CSA B44-13). However, it remains up to individual jurisdictions to adopt the standard. The MCP has been in effect in Ontario since 2014.

Monthly maintenance visits changed to quarterly visits in some jurisdictions and to semi-annual visits in others. The elevator contractor ultimately dictates the frequency of visits, within the limits of some jurisdictions, which sometimes dictate the minimum number of visits.

**MAINTENANCE VERSUS SAFETY**

What has this meant for owners? While the regulator provides for basic safety standards, anything beyond that (e.g. preventative maintenance and reliability) is now the responsibility of the owner. It's important that building owners and managers understand elevator maintenance has nothing to do with regulatory requirements. One deals with safety, while the other deals with reliability.

There is no question these changes have caused a variety of issues in the Canadian elevator industry. It used to be standard operating procedure to fix a broken elevator, to dispatch an adjuster (troubleshooter) to a site to rebuild a door operator or adjust a selector, and to dispatch a crew first thing in the morning to an elevator shutdown that occurred the night before.

As elevator companies adopt new technology and move toward maintenance-free systems, building owners and managers have to evolve as well. They now need to implement their own preventative maintenance programs for elevators and increase communication with elevator companies, particularly in the areas of callback monitoring, maintenance tasking and regulatory compliance. Ultimately, if the building owners and managers do not take these steps, the struggles they are having in regards to preventative maintenance and reliability will continue. ■

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