

Taking Care of Training

By Jim Burke

At some point in time, everyone who works for you had to be trained in the job they do and had to learn the responsibilities of their positions. Even the boss gets trained over time. So what happens when new people are hired or people need to be cross trained because of fewer employees in lean times? Who does the training?

Start by asking who taught the earliest employees. Were they self-taught on many machines and processes or were they trained by your equipment suppliers? Knowledge of processes is a very important aspect of every company. Many companies don't recognize this fact. Key people leave companies with very valuable information that may never be retrieved, at least without a long learning curve. This involves more than how to run saws or use joining machines. It's more about learning the overall processes and fundamentals of getting products manufactured properly, on time, and with the correct quality.

It is this process knowledge that key people within a company need to understand and implement. Training for those skills can take years and often means many mistakes along the way. The people who know these things are usually the managers or supervisors who

Shop turnover, cross training, and changing technology are all challenges that require a training program to ensure that your employees are working at peak efficiency

started doing the actual work years ago. Today they teach others or oversee other people who do the work. Can your company afford to train new people for these key positions? Only you have the answer to that question.

Today, with a leaner economy, many companies are forced to use fewer people to produce products if they are to make a profit. As a result, more employees need to be cross-trained to do more than one job in a production area. Who can cross-train these people? Assuming that you have core employees doing these functions now, they

can train other employees to do their jobs and likewise get trained by the other workers for second or third functions that they need to do. The best time for cross-train-

ing is when you have a full complement of workers. When the ranks have been thinned, some very knowledgeable workers are often not there to help train others.

THE ROLE OF THE BOSS

In smaller companies sometimes it's the boss who has the hands-on experience of the actual product manufacturing. He or she knows how to cut a frame properly, join a frame, cut glass, cut mats, mount art, and assemble the entire pack-



Training on CMCs is as much about computer skills as it is about production. Designing mats effectively and then cutting them quickly is important in today's production environment.

age into a finished frame job. The boss may even know how to pack framed art for shipping. But if too much time and expansion have taken place, the boss may not have a clue about how to use a computerized joiner or program it for new mouldings. The boss might also not know how the new computerized mat cutter works or the digital gauge on the new double miter saws.

And if the guy that knew those things just walked out the door, you can't assume that the boss is the answer. The boss can't keep up with everything new that happens as a company expands, especially with new equipment. Not to mention that a boss has to focus on sales and management for the company to be a success.

IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

Before computerized mat cutters an operator had to be able to cut a mat by hand. He had to have the skill to lay out and cut openings in mat board and be able to physically last all day cutting hundreds of duplicate mats. It was a skill job. So was joining frames, especially with earlier manual pneumatic joiners. You had to be able to join good corners all day long by setting the stops and pads for each moulding. A good operator remembered each moulding and knew how to set the machine up for joining.

Things have changed. Today an operator needs computer skills as much as hand skills. Saws haven't changed very much but some of the measuring systems have. An operator has to know how to use these new devices. As a result, some training is now easier than in the past, but some training takes more skill.

SUPPLIER TRAINING

Faced with this situation, what can you do? One of the easiest steps is to turn to your equipment and service providers. Companies like ITW/AMP, Pistorius, Active Sales, Ultramitre, CMC Doctor, CTD, Wizard, Gunnar, and others can often-

times help with the training of your employees on the safe, correct way to use their machines. This will cost money, but it could be less expensive than constantly having to correct production mistakes that have to be replaced or remade. Manufacturers have the expert knowledge on operating their equipment properly. Some suppliers may have a broader knowledge of more

than one product line or type of machinery. Availability of these resources may dictate which one you use. There is a cost associated with training in-house, so the additional expense of an outside resource should rule it out. One thing it probably won't do is to impart process knowledge—unless the person doing the training has manufacturing experience or can relate other examples that can help your particular business.

IDENTIFYING TRAINERS AND KEY PEOPLE

Normal employee attrition means that new people have to step into process positions and be able to run a machine, assemble a complete product, or pack something for shipping. Even office personnel get replaced, and someone new has to learn software, internal systems, and customers' names and needs. Sometimes it takes two or three key people with this knowledge to cover the entire range of operations.

That's why key people within the company need to have the experience and the knowledge of the equipment, the processes, and the expertise for training new employees.

If these people are not in place now, they need to be trained for the future survival of your company. Key people who possess these essential skills need

to be recognized and singled out. Get training for these key people in the areas in which they might need help. Make sure they understand their role in the company and that they have incentives to stay and grow with you. Such people might include those now running a



Before doing actual framing it is important to give a demonstration of the task, such as the steps involved in fitting. Encourage note taking, as that enhances memory and provides something a trainee can refer to in the future.



Instruction manuals for machines can provide valuable information, although all manuals aren't equal. Training done purely by such manuals is often less than adequate.

saw, a joiner, or a mat cutter. Or they might be fitters in an assembly area or someone in the shipping room who doubles as a fitter when needed. Someone in the company, either a manager or the owner, must be aware of each employee's talents and abilities as they pertain to your company. Not every company has a human resources person, but every company really needs one. If you wear six hats, maybe that's one of them.

EMPLOYEE APTITUDE

Training today requires a different set of work skills than 10 or 20 years ago. Today's operator needs to be able to program a machine and cut thousands of mats a day or join thousands of frames per shift. Computerization has increased production levels and decreased the hands-on skill levels needed of operators. However, some skills are still required, even if they are different. Work ethic is still important, and the attitude needed to produce at production levels is still important. An employee with a "custom framing" mindset won't produce fast enough in a production environment.

Training a new person for a production position also requires teaching them the mentality of production. Not everyone is suited to this type of work. It is not a matter of intelligence but of a disposition suited to making, cutting, joining, or assembling the same thing over and over again and finding fun in that work. Many people fit that description. It is important to find those people and train them to make your products. When hiring new people, you can't always get an accurate reading until they start work. Then it's a matter of finding the right job for that person's skill set. Perhaps they don't have the skills, and you let them go as quickly as possible. When cross training current employees, it is important to note how each person handles the new "job" after training. Asking them what they think about that position may give you some insight. If they perform better at the new position, make a note of it. With today's high unemployment, there are more possible candidates for your company than ever before.

SOLUTIONS

Set up a training plan by writing it down in an organized form. First make a list of the processes that will need training, such as 1) cutting frame rails on saws, 2) joining frames on joiners, 3) cutting mats on mat cutters, 4) mounting artwork to backing board, and so on.

Secondly, once each specific work area in your operation is listed, create a checklist of responsibilities for that position (if you can define them). Use a separate sheet of paper for each process or operation once it is outlined for the checklist for that particular job. Once completed, each list could be mounted on a backing board or on a clipboard and in the work area.

Someone needs to make that list, which is based on your company's requirements. On saws, for instance, the first item might be "how to measure correctly" using the scale on the saw. A second important item might be "how to hold the moulding in the saw so it doesn't rock." All the time, emphasize the safety aspects of using that equipment. Don't put fingers here, hold your hands like this, and so on.

Another important aspect of the training is to make sure that all operators know how to drain water filters, add oil to oilers, and the like. The basic maintenance of each piece of equipment should be part of the operator training. How to change blades on the saw might be a requirement of an operator if you don't have people designated to do that. To help you in these details, an operating manual should be available for each piece of equipment. (Keeping these in one central area might

be easier than next to each machine.)

Next, start with one machine and have someone train another employee on the use of that equipment, using the checklist you created for that job. The new operator should be shown the written list of responsibilities and expectations for that position. Once you are comfortable that you have other people trained on a saw, set a schedule to have someone trained on joiners. Each week, if time permits, schedule a training session on another piece of equipment or process. Eventually you will have cross-trained employees so they are ready to take over other jobs if required. If you have a complete list of processes and a complete checklist for each position, training new employees just got a lot more organized as well. ■



Learning to run a computerized joining machine requires an operator to find stored profiles in a computer as well as making good corner joints.

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