Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
Wednesday, 01 April 2009 00:00

Rick Carter, Executive Editor

What do you do with an aging workforce? More to the point, what are you doing with your aging workforce? This is part of the most recent question we asked of our MAINTENANCE TECHNOLOGY Reader Panelists. We also asked how their maintenance operation deals with the shortage of trained workers.

Twenty years ago, these issues could be treated separately. Today, with the oldest wave of Baby Boomers now lining up for Social Security, they have become two sides of the same coin. Among the many statistics available on the topic(s), here's one that efficiently addresses it:

The retirement-age population is projected to be more than twice as large in 2030 as it was in 2000, jumping from 35 million to 72 million. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau).

So in 2009, we're nearly a third of the way toward reaching that 72 million mark. Couple this with other information you've seen about the high percentage of U.S. manufacturers who say they can't find qualified workers to fill open positions (81%, according to a 2005 report from the National Association of Manufacturers), as well as the various projects begun in the last decade to build interest in manufacturing among the young, and the scope of the problem takes shape: Experienced workers are leaving the workforce in greater numbers than replacements can be found —and could be doing so for some time.

The economic downturn further spins the problem. With demand and production down, fewer workers are needed. While this has hastened the release of experienced workers (especially from automakers), it has not accelerated the search for their replacements. Some of the experienced workers have found opportunities elsewhere, thus fending off their retirements and increasing the chance that their skill knowledge will be preserved. This is a plus for them and

their new employers. But the value these workers bring is short-term. It will only postpone the need for new talent, not replace it. When budgets again become more robust, those who have delayed finding, nurturing and training their next generation of workers may find themselves without one.

None of this is lost on the Maintenance Technology Reader Panelists, who seem to be experiencing all combinations of the above events. Here's exactly what we asked them, followed by their responses:

How has your maintenance operation been affected by the shortage of trained workers and/ or the retirement of experienced workers? How are you and your company meeting the challenge this presents

"We have been fortunate in the mechanical disciplines due to surrounding industries such as Ford and GM that have provided people to us as they've reduced their operations," says a project manager in the Midwest. He adds that while a local trade school also keeps the company supplied with machine operators, he has been less fortunate finding electricians and machinists. "Because of this," he says, "we find ourselves looking out of town when a full machinist is required. This fills the need, but it places greater strain on our hiring costs."

A maintenance supervisor, also in the Midwest, reports a similar experience."Our company trains people who migrate from production to maintenance," he says, "but the training for maintenance mechanics, machine repair, electrician/hvac and pipe fitters is expensive. Now, with the availability of skilled people because of the automotive downturn in our state, we hope to hire journeyman-grade people and save the training money."

Not all maintenance departments have this option, of course. A maintenance mechanic at an East Coast utility, for example, says that the do-more-with-less mantra has essentially become corporate policy at his operation that has lost many positions through retirement and attrition. He notes that the maintenance team has coped with these losses because it knows its equipment, processes, procedures and systems. "But the squeeze is on because there's no time for knowledge transfer," he says, "and we are all getting older."

This Panelist's company has acknowledged its widening skill gap, though, and has begun what

he terms a mechanic's boot camp. It ensures that workers have the basic skill sets required and the safety knowledge to see procedures done right, he tells us. "They aren't allowed to touch a tool until they are through this course." After course completion, trainees are paired with mentors. "This means the job takes longer," he says,"but the challenge of striking a balance between production and training is one I have faith we'll overcome."

**Mentoring can bridge the gap**

Mentoring is a solution used to great effect by some Panelists. One utilities-industry maintenance mechanic, for example, credits his company's mentoring program for helping him impart the "tribal knowledge" needed to run his plant to 25 new hires in the past four years. With his response to this month's question, he included a 16-page Mentoring Guide his organization uses to explain the mentoring process. It outlines specific responsibilities and goals of the program, as well as the expected relationship between trainee and mentor. It includes worksheets and a page of suggested outside reading.

Another Panelist, a consultant, says companies without structured mentoring programs are missing the boat. As he puts it, youth-outreach programs need that second step, and maintenance teams can't depend on CMMS systems alone to accurately convey deep details. "Good mentoring efforts are the one thing I see missing for the most part," he asserts. "So much of the corporate memory today still resides in the heads and desk drawers of the senior people, especially in the craft and technician areas."

**But experienced workers continue to leave**

At press time, manufacturing layoffs continue among companies seeking a quick route to profitability. But the cost of big layoffs is high, both monetarily and in terms of lost experience, laments a Panelist in the Midwest who consults for large industrial clients. "A major U.S. client of mine with a substantial retirement fund has been using that fund to 'improve productivity' by retiring folks early," he explains. "This has cost them tens of millions of dollars per quarter in some places. And when the people who know how and when to do things are lost," he says, "there is nothing to fill the vacuum." He adds that approximately 70% of maintenance workers in his client's industry have more than 30 years experience and are currently eligible to retire, either by choice or directive. "This is terrifying," he says,"if you're the man counting on the equipment to meet production schedules."

It's also a terrifying thought for others, including—but not limited to—workers who are receiving their walking papers. That's what recently happened to one of our international Panelists. "I was employed as the Maintenance Systems project manager, heavily involved in fundamental plant-reliability issues, tribology and training," he reports. "Because there is only a limited

on-site knowledge of utilities, I was also involved in getting the details right (pipe layouts, correct steam traps, etc.). Now the company is facing a sales slowdown so I've been laid off." This Panelist adds that his talents are unusual because he has trades background across various industries, as well as a college degree. "I am working toward a Master's in Maintenance Management. But that does not seem to count, so out the door I go!" **MT**

---

***What's on your mind?***
*Have questions or comments on what you've just read in this column? Let us hear from you.*
*E-mail: rcarter@atpnetwork.com*

Joomla SEO powered by JoomSEF