

For On The Floor: What To Do When You Run Out Of People

Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
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What happens when staff cuts reduce your ability to get the job done? What's the solution when workload increases, but staff size does not? Our Reader Panelists and their employers address these challenges through automation, outsourcing, cross-training, reduced PMs and other means. How well they're doing is mixed: Tough times have inspired some to go lean with great success, while others find it still harder to meet their goals. Some acknowledge there's an even more pressing staff-related issue whose full impact is now beginning to be felt. It's the shortage of qualified workers.

When down is up

A heavy-industry facilities manager in the Midwest says recent maintenance-staff reductions at his operation have helped him streamline. "It improved our productivity because we kept our 'A' players," he says, "and it improved our preventive, corrective and predictive maintenance program." He adds that he "found idle time that was not being managed properly and work assignments not focused on the high-priority jobs that affect equipment reliability."

Thanks to these productive changes, this Panelist has not needed to rehire. "We have reduced our labor cost by over \$100K and reduced downtime by over 20% in the last 12 months," he notes. "We did this through good training and improved best-engineering practices when making repairs. We have also reduced our use of outside contractors in the last 12 months, and now use them on special jobs or those where they are more cost-effective."

Training is this Panelist's preferred weapon against the potential disruption of staff cuts. He cites a cross-training program he implemented for electricians and millwrights as being especially valuable. Ensuring that programs like this continue is his biggest challenge. "(We need to) train our team to be effective through cross-training, and build the entire team together to give us the flexibility to maintain proficiency when schedules change," he says. "Too many times we find ourselves short-handed or with only one person who knows how to fix a specific machine or piece of equipment. Cross-training reduces those incidents."

Outsourcing, for better or worse

Despite lean times, staff cuts have not been universal. Many Panelists say their headcounts have not changed in the past 12 months—*some even report increases*. A utility-sector maintenance team leader in the upper South, for example, was allowed to add to his maintenance crew when scrubbers were installed at his generating station. "If it weren't for that," he predicts, "we would have stayed at the old level." But while staying at the old level is nominally preferred over cutbacks, in cases where upgrades or expansions take place, the effect can be the same.

"We are currently understaffed due to a plant expansion and more machinery," says an engineer at a manufacturing facility in New England. "The new equipment is PLC-controlled, and includes a smart conveyor with traffic control and other sophisticated machinery." With more automation comes more maintenance outsourcing, he says. "Outside contractors are needed due to our new installations and because our in-house maintenance staff must maintain the existing plant," he reports, adding that the arrangement has worked well, in light of the site's good rapport with its outside contractors.

Not all Panelists are as fortunate in their dealings with outside contractors. "My opinion is you better watch them very closely," says the utility-sector Panelist from the South who "sends out certain equipment for rebuilds, (mostly) during major outages." His maintenance crew authorizes the equipment that is to be sent out, and when that occurs, he ensures that "it goes to a quality repair specialist with shop visits. This is the least I would do."

Outsourcing can also be expensive. "I recently used an outside contractor for maintenance on our plant air compressor that would have previously been done by our in-house staff," recalls a maintenance supervisor in the Northeast. "And boy did I have sticker shock! I have a renewed respect for the value of a talented multi-craft maintenance mechanic. Sticker shock aside," he continues, "I do not see the use of outside contractors decreasing. As larger repairs and projects arise I can only see their use going up." In his case, severe staff cuts led him to the practice. "My staff was reduced within the last year and was reduced previous to that," he says. "To say I am working with a skeleton crew would be an understatement."

In addition to outsourcing, this Panelist survives by scaling back PM and routine maintenance. He explains that breakdowns have been minimal because of his past meticulous PMs, but he's concerned management will take the recent history of a few machines as a sign that he doesn't need more staff, despite his warnings to the contrary. Evidence of this, he notes, "is that talk of replacing the laid-off maintenance people has ceased." Though work orders at his site have been rising, he thinks management is looking at ways to increase productivity other than by

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adding workers. "Where this leaves my staffing levels," he worries, "remains to be seen."

Another Panelist would be happy with any crew, skeleton or otherwise. "My staff was completely eliminated," says a maintenance manager for an upper-Midwest engineering service. "(I lost) three full-time employees and one part-time employee over the last 14 months." One quit; two "were let go;" one retired. "That leaves me to take care of three buildings and all the machinery. So I farm out all welder and burn-table repair and the more heavy machine repair because I don't have time to do it. Our PM program is out the window, too," he laments. "Our two production people are just refilling oil levels once a week."

With no one else for this Panelist to turn to, outsourcing has become necessary. "I just had Siemens and Fanuc in to work on controls for our VMCs because I didn't have the time," he says. This year, he's even outsourcing his grounds work. Making matters worse, he tells us, is the fact that the entire company just took a 10% pay cut, making it impossible to find a qualified maintenance person at what the company is willing to pay. "When I took over as maintenance manager three years ago," he adds, "we had six people in our department. Now it's just me with the same amount of machinery, so I see a lot more outsourcing coming."

Where are the workers?

A maintenance team leader in New England has been fortunate not to have had staff cuts over the past 12 months. Still, when an employee left recently, it was difficult to replace him. "Our biggest hurdle when looking for a replacement is the lack of qualified candidates applying," this Panelist notes. Another Panelist agrees: His top staff challenge is "finding qualified people who are willing to work with their hands." For yet another, it's "the quantity and quality of available candidates. Many do not have the fundamentals for the crafts."

Available candidates are missing other fundamentals as well, reports a Canada-based Panelist. As a consultant, he believes managers who are assessing new talent often overlook the absence of vital skills such as quality discrimination, hand-eye coordination, dexterity, spatial perception, problem-solving and judgment. "Manufacturers are guilty of downplaying these technical skills," he asserts, "because they do not test for them at the interview. Not only does this hamper the needs of industry, the message does not get back to the education system." The result, he adds, "is that these skills are not developed at the stage when learners are most receptive." **MT**

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