



Despite the perennial challenges of budget cuts and worker shortages, our Maintenance Technology Reader Panelists' view of 2010 is modestly upbeat: not a record-breaker, but better than expected for many.

What's more, they have high hopes for 2011. Responding to questions about the good and bad of 2010, and what they expect for next year, the group's overall optimism for the next 12 months is higher than it's been in the two years this column has run. Here's what they had to say.

This year's balancing act

Many Panelists describe 2010 as a balancing act that required them to operate with lean-era shortcomings (of people, parts, PM programs, etc.) while meeting the production demands of rebounding sales. Learning how to do this was both frustrating and instructional.

"I believe 2010 made a better professional out of me," says a reliability manager for a services provider in the lower Midwest. "Having spent a better part of my management life in an upswing economy, a slimming budget will put one in a position where they have to think more creatively." He acknowledges that there's nothing like trial by fire. "My company had to readjust its long- and short-term strategies, but I believe we came out of 2010 none the worse for wear."

Similarly, a maintenance coordinator at a New England manufacturer names his biggest 2010 maintenance challenge as getting replacement parts when needed, due to past practices that collided with a production upswing. "Until last year," he explains, "we had a reasonably safe inventory stock. Then we were asked to limit spending, which meant not replacing inventory needed to keep machines running." When production took off in 2010, he recalls, "we were caught short many times and have fallen into the waiting trap for delivery while a machine sits." On the positive side, the production upswing also brought new training opportunities that this Panelist calls "very beneficial."

At another location in New England, a corporate engineer tells us his biggest challenge in 2010 was keeping costs down while maintaining equipment. "We had to work very smart and pick our

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less expensive battles,” he reports, adding that it was a busy year for him with regard to projects. “The company also did a little better in sales,” he says, “so we are in recovery mode.”

More ado about workers

Regardless of the questions posed to Panelists, responses inevitably—and increasingly—involving this era’s top industrial story: worker shortages. Whether or not a company is doing well at the moment almost seems irrelevant. The worker-shortage problem has become endemic to manufacturing, its impact widely detectable and gaining strength.

“Maintenance at our plant has been a real challenge this year,” says a PM leader in the upper Midwest who blames his PM struggles on a lack of trades availability. “We’ve been able to do our day-to-day tasks,” he says, “but with the extra work that has come our way, we have stumbled.”

In the South, worker-related issues challenged a maintenance supervisor in August when production targets began to ramp up. “At that time,” he notes, “the budget began to loosen up and our biggest challenge was to fill maintenance positions that had been frozen for a year or so.” While the positions were eventually filled, he observes that the pool of available candidates was small, considering the economy and layoffs. “Now,” he says, “we are trying to play catch-up on neglected work and preventive maintenance.”

For a maintenance manager in New England, it’s the training side of the worker-shortage issue that bothers him. His plant has enough staff, he says, but they’re not up to speed on what the company wants to do. “We are trying to deploy engineered standards to become more efficient,” he explains, “but this will be a major undertaking as most people in the company have never worked under those specifications.” Accustomed to working with the standards during his 45-year career, this Panelist is surprised that such knowledge is not being passed on. “Hopefully, we’ll be successful,” he says, “but it could be painful for some of the management team as they have a hard time understanding.”

In the same boat, a maintenance manager at a repair service in the Midwest simply says, “I could have done better with a more experienced staff of any kind.”

Hope springs

For On The Floor: 2010 — More Sweet Than Sour (With Good Fortunes Ahead?)

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In contrast to their tepid expectations for 2010, and despite ongoing challenges, Panelists' hopes for 2011 are high. Learning from this year's bumps in the road, many feel better-positioned to take advantage of opportunities ahead.

"I think we learned a lot this year," states the maintenance supervisor in the South. "We learned that we can trim budgets and overtime goals and still survive. We also learned that putting off some preventive maintenance and projects can cost more in the long run. In 2011, we need to keep this in mind as we continue to strive to find the happy medium between cutting costs and maximum uptime for our facility. Next year," he says, "I would like to add some predictive maintenance as well as extend/modify our current PM program."

The reliability manager in the lower Midwest believes that indications for a strong 2011 are present. His group is prepared, he tells us, "to keep up with any influx in 2011 through preparation and planning."

And with new machinery on his list of 2011 expectations, the corporate engineer in New England believes next year will be the time to "do some fine-tuning with my maintenance departments." According to him, more funding should be available, which will allow him to "do all the big projects that need to be done in order for the company to run more efficiently."

Improved efficiency is a common 2011 goal for Panelists. That maintenance coordinator in New England, for example, plans to "jump-start" what he refers to as an "all-but-dead predictive maintenance program." He's looking to receive certificates in ultrasonic testing, level-3 infrared and possibly vibration analysis. "My expectation," he explains, "is that each technician will be competent in one or more of the predictive maintenance tools we have available at our site."

Another Panelist will "keep moving forward with plans we established this year," which include improving CMMS usage with new requirements and training for supervisors, maintenance techs and purchasing. "I know this is remedial stuff," he admits, "but it needs to be done to help us drive continuous improvements and keep costs under control."

Finally, the PM leader in the upper Midwest says he hopes to "complete our transformation next year, get all of our programs up and running, put on more tradespeople and get our apprentice program up to speed." As he sees it, "If we can maintain our current production level and get

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our new programs going, our future looks very promising.” **MT**

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