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In our last poll, about signs of economic recovery, comments from Maintenance Technology Reader Panelists trended toward the positive.

Their reports of production upticks or preparations for same were strong, if not dominant. While this was encouraging, it's evident that, at the same time, many Panelists remain tethered to company decisions made during bleaker periods. According to their latest input, cutbacks prompted by the economic problems that began some 18 months ago—reductions in budgets, personnel and capabilities—may hinder their turnaround momentum, at least in the short term. In late 2009, despite some positive signs, our group of responding maintenance pros is not sure they'll see significant gains in the new year.

Maintenance cuts run deep

Topics for discussion this month were twofold: 1) the biggest challenges of 2009 and how they were overcome; and 2) expectations for 2010. For the first time since the Reader Panel began one year ago, Panelists were not quick to address these issues. But respond they did, often with sobering comments. "A year ago our maintenance department had a staff of three," says a maintenance supervisor in a mid-Atlantic state. "Over the course of the year, I had to lay off two [of them]. This has, without a doubt, been our biggest challenge of 2009."

He goes on to explain that his company, whose product is tied to home building and remodeling, acted on its belief that less production would mean fewer maintenance requirements. "And this concept has not proved to be a linear scale," he laments. "I have all but stopped any PM activity, which was the foundation of my maintenance strategy. Not surprisingly, I find myself in a very reactive mode, which is how the department operated before my arrival. I will be very glad to put 2009 behind me."

To compensate for the loss of maintenance personnel, this Panelist's company has allowed him to use production workers—*up to 10 hours per week*. "One young man in particular has been assigned the duties," he says. "He is mechanically talented, but lacks any true trade skills. I have started training him in the basics, and my hope is to have him up to speed by the end of 2010."

A similar scene unfolded for a maintenance engineer at a Canadian milling operation. He reports having a "very turbulent 2009 that greatly affected our maintenance department through reduction in staffing levels, budgets and availability of spare parts." He adds that he is not quite confident to say that the challenges have been overcome, but that the department has been trying to manage. One of his biggest disappointments was management's decision to reduce predictive and preventive maintenance programs and basically resort to breakdown maintenance mode. "Instead of being proactive in utilizing the available downtime for extraordinary maintenance," he says, "the mill was idled and a bare minimum of employees were retained for patrols."

It's unclear to this Panelist if the strategy saved the company any money. But production has now jumped, he says, "and we are scrambling to plan and execute those jobs which could have been done in that available time. We are also dealing with a lot of failures that could have been prevented through our predictive and preventative maintenance programs. This has been a challenge everyone can learn from."

Reductions were also part of the strategy for an automotive supplier in the upper Midwest. "We saw a lot of cutbacks financially and personnel-wise, which affected our day-to-day work," reports this plant PM Leader. Cutbacks included PMs, he says, "which I'm sure we'll see the effects of down the road."

Despite this problem, and the fact that an early 2009 production uptick has slowed, this Panelist remains optimistic. A good sign, evidently, is the fact that his facility is still receiving machinery from plants that were closed, and also getting work back into the plant from Mexico and overseas. He tell us that he expects to be setting up this machinery after the first of the year.

Industry-specific problems show the bigger picture

Though not faced with the same demand fluctuations of many discrete manufacturers, power providers have nonetheless faced their share of economic disturbances. A maintenance supervisor at an electric plant in the upper Midwest, for example, blames a "shrinking energy market" for reducing income and causing the utility to reevaluate its process for handling outages. "They've increased the scope of work for the outage [crews], while making the outage budget and schedule a number-one priority," he says. Enacted without layoffs, the strategy has resulted in heightened monitoring of all work activities, manpower levels and budgets, along with the need for more frequent work authorization.

"Next year, we are in the same situation regarding sales and income," predicts this Panelist. "It will be another challenge to meet the newly adjusted budget based on the forecast." Again, though, the good news is that no layoffs are planned. But it's possible only because "budget cuts have been made by all departments" in all areas except personnel.

At another utility, safety procedures, not the economy, presented top challenges for a Panelist from the East Coast. "Our biggest challenge has been lock-out/tag-out," he says, describing a long-successful system that eschews the use of actual locks. "OSHA has allowed us to use tags and affix AEs (additional elements) on the equipment to prove we have verified the blocking," he reports. "We have used this system for years, but this year there have been a lot of errors, and we find ourselves on a slippery slope heading toward a bad accident."

A maintenance journeyman by trade, this Panelist theorizes that the company's lock-out/tag-out procedure is too complicated with too many special exemptions. "For now," he says, "we are limiting the personnel who can hold a clearance and making sure that each clearance is independently verified. The personnel picked for this position will be responsible for briefing all personnel authorized to work under the clearance. By doing this," he continues, "we hope to stabilize the situation and reinstill confidence in the system."

And he'll reinforce the process with additional training—*the same approach that a maintenance supervisor at a food-production facility in the Midwest will take in 2010*
. "I'll attend more seminars and Web-based learning," he says. "I'll also conduct seminars for my crew, as well as have them sit in on Webinars." His training goal is to stay on top of new procedures and requirements that relate to maintaining sanitary conditions.

As he describes it, the biggest challenge in the food industry is always having to perform to a higher sanitary level. This is due to the issues of food-borne pathogens that are showing up in certain foods. "Mercifully," this Panelist says, "we have been able to avoid any issues, but we can never get complacent. We have always performed to a very high level of sanitation and cleanliness, but the requirements continue to rise, with no end in sight."

Although he fully agrees with the need for ever-higher standards, "there is a cost," he says, "and most of it is maintenance-centered." **MT**

What's on your mind? Have a question or comment on what you've just read in this column? Have a suggestion for a future Reader Panel question? Let us hear from you. E-mail: rcarter@atpnetwork.com