Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
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As 2011 draws to a close, our MAINTENANCE TECHNOLOGY Reader Panelists offer their views on their professional and personal experiences over the past 12 months. For many of them, this was a good year. Not surprisingly, positive views are tempered with negatives, but at least some of the problems our respondents faced in 2011 are of an evolutionary nature (such as the omnipresent skilled-labor shortage).

Many Panelists indicate that, through training and strategic focus on improving asset management, they may be better equipped than in previous years to deal with this and other realities of modern manufacturing—*and are working harder than ever in the process*. The best summation may be that, barring a game-changing event between now and December 31, most Panelists rate 2011 as, at worst, a year of important lessons learned and, at best, a year of progress, despite “flies in the ointment.”

A good year

“One of our standout successes this year was the ability to develop a core KPI list for the maintenance department,” says a production-support manager in the Midwest. “In the past we had some KPIs, but their definitions did not drive change to align with asset reliability. Another success for us was the development of key reports derived from our CMMS. In the past, we spent so much time on the input of data into our CMMS that no one used the data for any analysis. With the newly created reports,” he notes, “our plants will be able to see where their labor is being utilized and they’ll be able to Pareto-chart failures for RCA analysis.”

A Panelist in the Midwest reports similar successes. “I have spearheaded a major PM coup, and we are getting some good work in and seeing our throughput increase,” explains this PM leader for a heavy manufacturer. “As a whole, our company has been extremely busy. We have seen a major demand for our product [despite] the struggling economy. A lot of this has happened,” he adds, “since we were separated from [a former owner] and became an independent company.”

From the lessons-learned department, a consultant in a mid-Atlantic state says that this year,

his clients are increasingly interested in equipment reliability and are striving to find and hire reliability professionals to provide the technical resources and capabilities to improve the OEE of their assets. “Unfortunately,” he says, “demand for these individuals appears high, and ability to fill these openings is strained.” That’s a critical issue facing maintenance professionals everywhere.

A corporate engineer in the Northeast perhaps typifies the yin/yang of 2011. For goals reached, he simply lists “training and more organized shop procedures.” For goals missed, it was “CMMS implementation, new machines and new technology,” which, implementation aside, sounds like a problem to have. In fact, when asked to compare 2011 with 2010, he says this year he was “too busy to do anything but monster projects!” While that may have been frustrating, it’s probably another situation common to all in this field.

But not without problems

For a utility journeyman in the Northeast, strained resources were a top challenge for the year. As he puts it, “An overview [of 2011] would reveal many shortcomings for us, due mostly to more work than personnel and time to accomplish it. We also learned valuable lessons in tool control, where we finally discovered that self-monitoring and voluntary control just do not work.” From a performance standpoint, he continues, “The year has not been stellar, but if we stay the course and practice what we have learned, we should have a much better chance next year.”

Another Panelist says his team was handicapped in 2011 both by fewer resources and problems caused by an inexperienced maintenance team leader. “We haven’t had any standout successes in 2011,” he reports, “and our major challenges have been to continue to operate with fewer people in the department. There doesn’t seem to be any interest in replacing individuals as they leave. As of now, I am down two senior mechanics and one electrician on the third shift, so it gets interesting when we have machinery failures.” This Northeast-based maintenance manager adds that his maintenance team’s new leader “lacks the necessary skills to lead and operate the department successfully, which has led to many downfalls as we move on.” The good news is his expectation that a late-year management change will get his facility “back into the mainstream.”

Gains and goals

Despite setbacks on the floor, most Panelists indicate that this year has been good for them personally and professionally—*and their expectations for 2012 are high.* “For me, 2011 was a learning year,” says the utility journeyman in the Northeast. “Financially it was good, and my professional and personal development was superior.” He adds that he looks forward to following this rewarding year with more of the same in 2012. “We have proved that we are a

learning organization," he adds, "and now we must prove that we can stay the course." He expects his organization to continue with its excellent training program, which includes monthly meetings designed to uncover and address weaknesses. This approach, he believes, has given his organization some of the best-performing maintenance sections in the industry.

The Midwest-based production-support manager tells us he learned more leadership skills from the people around him this year. "I also learned more about asset reliability, which I hope to use to help my company become more efficient and disciplined in maintaining its assets." Additionally, he hopes to obtain his CMRP certification, noting that "with the economy in the mess it's in, I am happy to be with a company that values hard work and continuous improvement, and shows its appreciation for people that practice those values."

Optimism about the future is reflected in different ways by our Panelists: One discusses being grateful to be employed as he moves past traditional retirement age. "I am lucky to still have a job, as I will be 67 on my next birthday," he explains. Others look forward to a busy year ahead. According to the Midwest-based PM leader, all indications point to growth in 2012. He notes a recent announcement of $150,000,000 in investments at his site, as well as news of long-term customer contracts that will be retained through 2018. "For 2012," he vows, "I am planning to be there the whole year and will continue to be a thorn in the side of our leadership with our PM program!" **MT**

About the MT Reader Panel

The Maintenance Technology Reader Panel is comprised of working maintenance practitioners who have volunteered to answer bimonthly questions prepared by our editorial staff. Panelist identities are purposely not revealed, and their responses are not necessarily projectable.

The Panel welcomes new members:

Have your comments and observations included in this column by joining the Reader Panel at www.mt-online.com. Click on "Reader Panel" under the "MT Resources" header, and follow the instructions. If accepted, you will automatically be entered into a drawing for a cash prize after one year of active participation

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