

Don't Procrastinate...Innovate!: Tick-Tock - Time to Innovate!

Written by Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor
Thursday, 13 January 2011 13:49



In 2000, Hollywood released a powerful movie based on Sebastian Junger's book *The Perfect Storm*. It chronicled the true story of the loss of the *Andrea Gail* fishing boat and its entire crew in 1991, during an unusual extratropical storm known as the "Halloween Nor'easter," or "The Perfect Storm."

Since that time, the term "perfect storm" has become a metaphor for any rare event in which a confluence of trends and circumstances align and begin building toward a bleak outcome. "Innovation comes from the producer – not the customer." ...W. Edwards Deming

Sadly, a perfect storm can grow into a tragedy of epic proportions without being noticed by those who are about to experience its wrath. As you've previously read in this magazine (and will continue to read)—*this month in Bob Williamson's "Uptime" column and in the "Technology Showcase" about Maintenance Management on page 34, for example* —

North America's industrial might is now being challenged by a perfect storm set into motion by myriad problems. These include, first and foremost, educational systems that aren't particularly interested in teaching vocational skills and, in many cases, aren't adequately equipped to teach and train on emerging technologies. The situation is being exacerbated by the lack of apprenticeship opportunities; increased global competition for those left in the skilled labor pool; rapid deterioration of capital assets and infrastructure; and the fact that many in our knowledgeable, well-trained, highly experienced, yet aging, workforce are about to retire en masse. And that's not just my assessment.

Statistics on the issue abound, including this: The Employment Policy Foundation (EPF) projects we'll suffer an 80% skill loss over the next 10 years as the Baby Boomer generation officially becomes eligible for retirement. We must recognize that a large percentage of those skilled jobs will be lost forever—and *that the remaining workforce will be expected to absorb and cope with the devastating results.* The clock is ticking faster and faster...

We cannot and must not rely on government to legislate a solution for us. YOU are the solution! If we are to successfully confront this growing catastrophe, we must first recognize the elephant in the room, work out a plan of action and learn to work smarter by adopting practices that add

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value to everything we do. The time for procrastination is past; the time for innovation is here.

This column is dedicated to helping you work smarter through the application of innovative approaches and solutions designed to combat the effects of skilled-labor attrition and, in turn, help you deliver a more competitive product or service that will generate more profit that can then be reinvested in the engine of America. Along with my new column, Applied Technology Publications, parent of *Maintenance Technology* and *Lubrication Management & Technology* magazines, is launching the "Maintenance & Reliability Innovator of the Year Award" program. The competition will allow you to "pass on" and share your successful innovative gizmos, gadgets, procedures, methods and ideas with the rest of the maintenance and reliability community. Look for more details next month in this publication and online at this site.

"Never before in history has innovation offered promise of so much to so many in so short a time." ...Bill Gates

The truth about innovation

Innovation is the successful implementation of a creative, ingenious or imaginative idea that both changes and improves the way we do business. An innovative idea can manifest itself as a change in the way we currently view and perform a process; in the way we measure, check or analyze for acceptable condition; in the way we organize resources to deliver increased value; or in the way we adopt inventive and practical devices as labor-saving tools.

Improvement success can be delivered and measured in many ways, including: maintenance improvements (i.e., increased asset reliability, reduced asset maintainability); operational improvements (i.e., cycle time, production output, product quality, customer service); and safety and environmental improvements (i.e., accident/incident reduction, energy reduction, carbon footprint reduction. All of these improvements can be measured and tracked through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

It should be noted that true innovation tends to exemplify itself through simplicity and practicality. Once implemented, an innovation is often showered with comments such as "I could have done that," or "I don't know why we've never done this before!"

An innovative idea is usually born of an individual—but *nurtured and implemented through team effort*. This means that if innovation is to flourish, we must all think entrepreneurially (as if the business in which we work belongs to us). Make no mistake: Your business is not a business without the strengths you bring to the table.

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If an idea is to flourish, it must be able to with-stand scrutiny, meet the needs of your organization, be backed up with a solid business case, pass a risk-analysis review and provide a valid return on investment (ROI) statement that outlines how the idea's implementation success is to be measured in tangible terms. (My March column will focus on providing the tools to help you develop a strong business case and ROI statement.) Additionally, the idea must be presented and sold to management in a professional manner. (If your organization has a "suggestion box" or "improvement box" program, it probably reflects all the previously mentioned requirements.)

Remember, too: If an innovative environment is to flourish, it will be the result of a combined effort of the frontline workforce within maintenance and operations, as well as supervisors and managers who must take ideas, allow them to be tested or piloted and rolled out into the plant.

Seeking out opportunity

As a change-management consultant, I've always believed that the best ideas—*and the easiest to implement* —

probably can be found "in your own backyard." Frontline personnel have a special intimacy with their equipment assets, processes and procedures. If existing instructions or methods don't make sense, many of them will adopt innovative "workarounds" or more streamlined approaches to their work, and only share them with management if there's an open environment for positive change. This sets up an excellent starting point for any innovation program.

As you may have heard before, the maintenance department has typically been successful in spite of itself. Thus, depending on the current level of best-practice operation, any maintenance department could easily be guilty of causing well in excess of 50% of unnecessary maintenance work due to inefficiencies in managing its resources and inefficient PMs. Furthermore, many of the residual operations-caused maintenance can be managed out with the right approach. Accepting this fact opens up a massive innovation opportunity for every maintenance department. In future installments of this column, we'll explore the differences between what the maintenance department manages versus what it actually controls—*and how it must be innovative in its approach to seek out the value opportunities in both aspects of its business.*

"Everything begins with an idea." ...Earl Nightingale

I hereby issue a challenge to all maintenance and reliability professionals (including management) to immediately don your innovative-thinking caps. Begin writing down whatever improvement ideas you have and prepare yourself for a wave of innovation as we explore ideas to help us make it through our perfect storm. *Tick-tock...tick-tock...* **MT**

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