The great pitcher Satchel Paige often said “Don’t look back—something might be gaining on you.” I bring this up, not because we are now in full swing of the baseball season, but because it leads to a relevant point about professional development in the maintenance and reliability field.

Today’s Professionals. We just completed two exciting professional development events at the University of Tennessee Maintenance and Reliability Center. The first was MARCON 2004, our annual conference. Feedback showed that the papers, the presentations, and the entire content were a step up in quality and delivery. I think this was partly due to the subjects presented being of more interest, and perhaps some actual quality improvement in content, but also because the attendees this year were very serious about learning and improving their knowledge.

It struck me that there is an increasing awareness of the importance of professional development permeating the workforce. As the economy climbs out of the doldrums (albeit slowly), there appears to be more awareness of the competitive necessity for excellence in the reliability and maintenance areas. Notice that I used the term “competitive necessity,” not “competitive advantage.” Certainly maintenance and reliability can be used as an advantage, but frankly it has become a necessity for survival in many business sectors.

Tomorrow’s Professionals. The second event was our “Overview of Modern Maintenance and Reliability Concepts” (or “boot camp,” as our students lovingly call it). This is a week-long training session that our maintenance and reliability student interns participate in before reporting to summer intern positions with their companies.

During these five 8-hour-plus days, we exposed them to many of the definitions, concepts, acronyms, systems, technologies, and management philosophies that govern maintenance and reliability in today’s world class enterprises. This year we added a case study that the students, grouped into teams, worked on throughout the week to reinforce the material presented to them by various experts. We also had representatives of several of the employers adding their experience and know-how for the students (and learning a few things as well).

The Case Study. The case study involved the Volunteer Manufacturing Co. (VMC), a medium-age plant with a highly reactive approach to maintenance and a somewhat poor

record of reliability, but with a new plant manager who charged the teams with recommending improvements to bring the plant back to outstanding performance in regard to maintenance and reliability.

Converting Information to Action. As one of the “VMC managers” listening to the five student team reports and recommendations on Friday, I was pleasantly startled by the grasp that these young engineering students had of various concepts and ideas. I had expected good presentations, but I heard very good to outstanding reports.

The students had obviously listened well, but they had also taken what they heard and translated it into concrete action plans based on the VMC situation. It was extremely gratifying to observe how well they had assimilated a voluminous amount of information and converted it to solutions and proposals.

The Point. Although it may seem that this article so far is a bit self-serving, the real point I want to make is two-fold. One, the maintenance and reliability professionals currently at work appear to be realizing that professional development is key to improvement and that maintenance and reliability are legitimate strategic areas for enterprise survival as well as for competitive advantage. More and more, they are seeking out methods to improve their performance in order to raise the competitive situation within their enterprises.

Second, there are students entering the profession of maintenance and reliability who are going to enter the workforce with more knowledge and ability than many of us from my generation did. They are going to enter with experience and rapidly help their enterprise improve performance.

If representatives from either or both of these two groups happen to work for your competitor, you might be in trouble. They might be catching up or passing you. If you haven’t done so, perhaps you should consider initiating your own professional development plan. Do it, and then don’t look back. **MT**