Written by Phil Peck, PPC Mechanical Seals.
Friday, 01 June 2007 00:00

Phil Peck, PPC Mechanical Seals Consolidations, off-shore sourcing and closings have exacted a heavy toll the U.S. manufacturing sector over the past 10 years. In the process, critical gaps in knowledge, levels of experience and numbers of active experts have been showing up in many operations.

Nowhere are these gaps more evident than in the Maintenance and Reliability arena. When you couple them with decreased staffing levels, it's no wonder that the ability to maintain and run a world-class manufacturing plant is more challenging than ever before.

Almost every aspect of a plant has been impacted, including its valuable skilled trades. In many operations, inadequately prepared individuals simply are thrust into positions of responsibility and left on their own to develop. The need for training and education has never been so high.

At the same time, most Plant Managers are being asked to reduce costs—specifically Maintenance costs. Purchasing often takes the lead in driving down these costs, yet the only place that's possible is in the area of hardware.

Unfortunately, hardware costs are typically the smallest part of a Maintenance budget (and overall costs), even when taking into account the re-conditioning and/or repairing of equipment. The biggest savings are obtained by cutting consumption of mechanical equipment hardware, reducing breakdowns and extending time between repairs.

The key to driving down hardware consumption is based upon knowledgeable, trained people with expert support and assistance. The key to running a profitable plant is for Management to support training, education and development of all personnel—that includes Maintenance, Reliability and Operations. Knowing how to maintain and operate rotating equipment is a basic skill set. There also is a need to be competent in operating and maintaining all of the ancillary support equipment. The ability to follow proper startup and shutdown procedures is vital in preventing premature equipment failures and unscheduled shutdowns. From Management's perspective, this type of training requires precious time and resources. Fortunately, countless outside options are available to assist in the process.

For example, any number of former plant Maintenance and Reliability people now work as independent consultants. Their vast knowledge and experience can have an enormous positive effect on your operations. Thus, their services are usually easy to justify.

Most OEMs also offer training and/or service programs to customers. The depth and scope of a program will determine the cost—if any. Another good source is industry trade and professional associations. For example, the Fluid Sealing Association (FSA) offers mechanical seal expertise. The Hydraulic Institute (HI) provides rotating equipment and standards education. The Society of Tribolologists and Lubrication Engineers (STLE) is known for supplying a wide range of engineering information.

Numerous other organizations and trade publications, including this one, also offer excellent professional development opportunities for the workforce of tomorrow.

Whatever education and training route you elect to take, remember that the first step—the "key" step—is deciding and committing to the growth and development of your personnel.

Phil Peck is director of Sales and Marketing for PPC Mechanical Seals, based in Baton Rouge, LA. He also serves as chairman of the FSA Mechanical Seal Division's Education/Publication Working Group.