Written by Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor
Sunday, 01 March 2009 00:00

Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor The human resource represented by a company's workforce is arguably the most valuable asset a company possesses. Ironically, to an investor, corporate wealth and value is counted in terms of the current bank balance, order book, inventory and current physical asset value.

In reality, rarely is a price or value tag associated with the workforce and its experienced knowledge of the corporate business—and its intimate working relationship with the processes, procedures and equipment used to deliver an end product. On the other hand, one of the things that successful and sustainable businesses understand is that without a quality human resource working to manage its assets, a company will quickly flounder, or worse yet, cease to exist. That's especially true with regard to the human resource element of a maintenance department.

In many companies, maintainers begin their professional lives with several thousand hours of on-the-job training,coupled with formal classroom attendance. They then move on to accumulate a wealth of experience and knowledge regarding business processes, manufacturing operations and the general and idiosyncratic nature of many individual pieces of equipment running in unique environments within their respective companies. Whenever an organization loses a maintenance person, be it through lay-off or career move, the company is losing one of its most valuable assets.

When it comes time to replace a maintainer, the responsibility of finding a similar skilled replacement is most likely to fall on the shoulders of the human resources (HR) department.

The new hire can be attained in two ways, either through the direct hiring of a similar experienced individual from outside the company, or through an effective upgrading and training of existing/new staff.

Not every company will have an actual HR department, though. In this case, it is common to designate a person(s) with some real understanding of the job required of the new employee to perform in an HR role. That designated person often is a maintenance superintendent/manager or engineering manager. Regardless of who performs the HR function, it behooves the maintenance department to establish a working relationship with HR personnel and develop a team approach to both hiring and training of maintenance staff.

Including HR on your team

The HR department can be a wonderful asset to a maintenance department as it has the ability to facilitate many programs on behalf of maintenance. In order to function effectively, an HR department must be cognizant of both long- and short-term corporate and maintenance plans, needs and requirements, which calls for it to be open to establishing positive working relationships. HR assistance to maintenance will most often materialize in the following areas:

- Job descriptions
- Hiring
- Training programs - individual and group
- Apprenticeship programs
- Compensation/incentive packages

Job descriptions…

Just as a piece of equipment is designed to a working specification for its intended use within the company, each job position needs to be described in terms of the role the position plays in the organization, and the expected responsibilities each position must shoulder. Job descriptions, or specifications, describe minimum skill requirements and accreditations, skills update expectations and basic responsibilities that need to be met for each job and level of position unique to the corporate culture. Meeting and surpassing these specifications are usually a condition of employment—and are used as a requirements template for hiring new individuals and setting up department training programs.

A job description is an important requirement for any position because it sets down a series of guidelines that lets each individual know exactly what is expected of him/her. The HR

department is able to use many job description templates and work with maintenance to develop relevant job descriptions that reflect the unique needs of your departmental culture.

Hiring…
When hiring is required, the HR department is the right agency to perform all but the final interview process and deliver to the maintenance a suitable candidate—or candidates—to meet the department's requirements. This unburdens maintenance management personnel, allowing them to get on with the job of maintenance management.

Training programs…
Whenever a new hire, process, methodology, technology or corporate direction is introduced, training will be required. Training programs are best when they are designed and planned to meet both individual and group needs. The HR department works together with the maintenance department to determine training content and delivery. Maintenance schedules the team members who are to receive the training.

Apprenticeship programs…
Ever more important in these days of an aging expert workforce is the fact that many companies are unaware that they may be eligible to set up apprenticeship programs. The HR department is able to broker such programs with State and Federal authorities—as well as set up any suitability audits. Companies with existing apprenticeship programs will likely already be using the HR department to coordinate and administer these programs on maintenance's behalf.

Compensation/incentive packages…
In addition to dealing with routine compensation, vacation and sick-pay issues, the HR department will usually be closely associated in the development and administration of any corporate or department incentive programs (often in the form of gifts or money) for valid cost reduction suggestions and additional compensation for skills acquired, etc.

In other words
Maintenance and the HR department must clearly communicate with one another and draw upon each other's experience and strengths to put together a valid set of deliverables that reflects the interests of both departments and the corporation as a whole. Keep in mind, however, that the terms of this partnership won't necessarily be carved in stone. Changing market conditions and corporate restructuring will dictate ongoing and ever-changing relationship requirements.

Ken Bannister is lead partner and principal consultant for Engtech Industries, Inc. Telephone: (519) 469-9173; e-mail: kbannister@engtechindustries.com

Want more Ken?
Then don't miss the chance to hear what Ken Bannister and many of our other great contributors have to say in person, at MARTS 2009.

Visit www.MARTSconference.com for details.