Written by Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor
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Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor The acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is truly a noble pursuit. I submit the following account of one of my own personal experiences as an example.

I recently was privileged to participate in a very special metal-shaping course with my son. Delivered over several weekends, the sessions introduced us to the world of metal shaping and its mysterious "English Wheel." (This piece of equipment is known in England as a "raising machine" because it stretches and raises metal into smooth, sensuous, curved shapes.)

During the course, I opted to fabricate a 1/3- size "boat tail" speedster-styled rear fender with multiple compound curves and welds. Incorporating a wheel well sized appropriately to accommodate a clock, it would be, I thought, a unique wall decoration for my shop.

John, our instructor, was a retired metal craftsman in his late 70s, who taught us how to cut, hammer, shape, weld and roll lifeless pieces of steel into metal objects we could be proud of. More importantly, he managed to pass on enough basic skills, tricks of the trade and understanding of hand-tool and English-wheel metal shaping for us to produce, in just a matter of hours, a level of craftsmanship that would have taken him two years of apprenticing to achieve.

During our conversations, John cited his concern over the withering of the maintenance gene pool and today’s "throw-away" society that could care less about his beloved English Wheel. Those, he told us, were the main reasons prompting him to pass on his metal-shaping secrets.

Today's news is full of forced early retirements in which the most senior of skill sets belonging to job specialists, tradespersons and skilled craftspeople are being erased forever. Unfortunately, many such layoffs are knee-jerk reactions to loss of market share and failing balance sheets that force the highest labor expense out of the door along with the experience and knowledge.

Faced with such a decision, a company often does not exercise good decision-making when it comes to succession planning. As a result, huge voids are created in the company's asset management capabilities.

One of my a recent consulting assignments involved an automotive assembly plant that cut back its two senior lubrication technicians—*and did so without giving any succession training to the remaining junior technician* . Five power and free conveyor automatic lubrication systems, dispensing expensive high-temp moly chain oil, ran dry and lost their prime. In an effort to keep the chains lubricated, a junior oiler bypassed the autolubers by placing a drum with an open drip valve pouring oil directly on the chain. This situation went unchanged for over six months—
resulting in a lubricant cost well into six figures
! That was more than 20 times what it should have cost, all because the junior oiler was not shown what to do, nor did he ask what he should do.

This expensive situation could have been avoided had the company merely contracted with a retired senior lubrication technician to return the day after his retirement began for a short-duration project. Under this arrangement, he could have worked with the replacement staff to document simple—*but vital*—procedures, tricks and intimate equipment knowledge.

I challenge those of you close to retirement to assure your legacy by "passing the torch." Work with management in devising a plan to share your knowledge with your successors. I further challenge those in junior positions to step up and ask for that torch. Finally, I challenge management to perform succession planning and create an environment in which the torch can be passed successfully. Our future depends on it. Good Luck!

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