Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
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All Maintenance Technology Reader Panelists agree that training is important. The need for it is ongoing, and it is a part of routine strategy for most operations.

Today, its value is heightened as manufacturing operations face growing departures of experienced workers.

Viewed less uniformly by Panelists is how to best implement training. Their specific conditions, budgets, needs and policies dictate whether training is done on-site, off-site, hands-on or by way of OJT, mentoring or other approaches. Each can be effective, say Panelists, depending upon whom you ask. But there is also a reported lack of training among Panelists. Despite today's workforce pressures, some say their operations' training programs are either poorly conducted or not conducted frequently enough to have value. Those who face the consequences of inadequate training voice serious concern.

Taking a 'dynamic' approach

"We believe that the best training program is the one owned by the work group involved," says a utility-industry Panelist from the Northeast. "These are the people actually doing the work. Who knows better their needs, weaknesses and strengths?"

The types of training conducted at his plant are determined by the group. "We favor the use of Dynamic Learning Activities," he explains. These involve "hands-on interactive" methods and "peer-coached learning experiences, which seem to be retained best by trainees, and give the most bang for the training dollar."

This Panelist adds that training topics are determined by a committee that includes various maintenance crew members as well as representation from those to be trained (see Sidebar below). "I know the word 'committee' sends visions of wasted time, endless debate and disagreement after disagreement," he says. "But if you take your time, form your committee wisely, put trust in it and allow it to function, it can turn out to be a very effective investment."

Off-site for efficiency, hands-on for results

A PM leader in the upper Midwest says his operation has "combined trades into two groups, electrical and mechanical, which a lot of companies have already done." This efficiency-inspired consolidation included shifting maintenance training off-site, though health and safety training remains on-site. The good news, reports this Panelist, is that "we normally have an opportunity to receive training if it is needed. It is ongoing and available to all of our trade people." But he is uncomfortable with the fact that critical maintenance training programs have been taken out of the facility. "I feel that the best training is hands-on," he says. "Most of the off-site training is so generic that it is not going to help on the floor."

Sharing his view is a maintenance engineer in the Northeast. "We train our people on the job, and bring in experts for on-site training," he says. This Panelist adds that while his multi-site company has begun implementing TPM, "which changes the commitment of our maintenance staff and the rest of the plant," training within company facilities is ongoing. Based on semi-annual skills assessments that are used to determine specific training needs in areas of weakness, "the results are tracked by myself and the maintenance manager of each facility" to ensure training programs remain effective.

Identifying, addressing gaps

"In response to your request for information about training," comments a maintenance manager in the Northeast, "we are light years behind." This Panelist's company "spends very little on maintenance training, and does not administer proficiency tests to see if an individual is suitable or possesses the skills necessary to succeed. It has become very frustrating." Making matters worse, he says, is that "we have a number of associates who are close to retirement and will need to be replaced soon. I'm very disappointed that we are not looking ahead to replace the skills that are present."

While not in the same dire position as this Panelist, a maintenance specialist at a Midwest process plant still sees much room for training improvement at his operation and in the industry at large. "Maintenance training takes a low priority in this day and age," he opines. "Industry is becoming more dependant on contractors and vendors for this support," a practice that he says tends to "waive" plant-specific personnel training. "It is more cost-effective to deal with the vendor (for training)," he notes, "but this is not a good solution for some of our remote sites."

The real solution, says this Panelist, is to "focus more on a maintenance culture shift and succession planning. A shift toward procedure-creation for maintenance repairs and

specific-equipment maintenance strategies that align with (an overall site strategy) would be effective, and need to be treated as 'evergreen' documents." This Panelist also suggests that team members learn to use online sources to support their training. "With today's access to Web technology and online support," he says, "our people just need to know how to access this." **MT**

Who's On the Training Committee?

One Panelist strongly supports his company's committee approach to training and offers an outline of how it works. At his site, the training committee determines and reviews training procedures and typically includes a cross-section of plant personnel, along with representatives from those scheduled to be trained. Here are his suggestions for who should be on the committee and why:

- ***Department head*** *— "It's his budget, and he really has a big stake in it being effective. He must enter with an open mind and trust in his people. A manager has no greater opportunity to learn about his organization than this."*
- ***Dedicated trainers*** *— "They know the world of training, costs, what's available, what is possible to develop and what could be contracted out."*
- ***Two line supervisors*** *— "We include them for what they see as issues, weaknesses and strengths."*
- ***Three to four of the craftspeople to be trained*** *— "This is the most important element. It could take awhile for them to open up, but they know the situation and needs better than anyone else. Once they know their opinion is valued and that it will be acted upon, you'll be surprised at their response and involvement. It empowers them to help decide the training and allows them to help develop their own careers."*

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