Written by Jane Alexander, Editor-In-Chief
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If it weren't so scary, it would be amusing. The mainstream media seems to have finally discovered our dirty little secret: There aren't enough skilled workers to maintain the critical infrastructure and processes that civilized societies and healthy economies depend on. Moreover, this mell of a hess isn't just "our" problem, it's global!

Too bad it took the recent horrible disasters in the Gulf and Big Branch mine to spark interest in the maintenance field. While these tragedies don't appear to have resulted from a lack of qualified workers, they have, in a way, helped give "legs" to the skills-crisis story. I've noticed it being touched on by several sources lately, including *The New York Times, CNBC.com and Yahoo News* . What took 'em so long? Our neck of the publishing woods has been documenting the progress of this perfect storm for years.

Shortly after being thrown into this line of work 11 years ago, I found myself reporting on the threat to the process industries from the loss of countless treasured "old pump guys" (industry jargon, not mine). These were the highly skilled and respected individuals that organizations relied on to keep the hearts of their plants up and running, no matter what. Their wide-scale departure from the workforce—*for whatever reasons*—was deemed catastrophic due to the fact that most engineering schools weren't providing the practical "hands-on" training that would lead to the successful management of crucial pumping systems. Not until I joined *Maintenance Technology* in 2005 did I learn that this pump-world problem was just one of the first bands of a deadly storm that will be raging for years to come.

While most of this discussion has focused on growing the skilled trades, what about those who might be managing the work of these trades in the future? What's coming out of our colleges and universities? If my recent conversation with a freshly minted mechanical-engineering grad doesn't frighten you, I don't know what will. Let's hope it reflects an isolated case. (Please, don't ask me.
God as my witness, I can't recall what institution gave an engineering degree to this nice young man; I was too stunned by what he shared with me to remember.)

What was he going to do now? "Get an MBA," he proudly announced, "start and run a business." He asked if I had any recommendations. What an opening! I immediately suggested that ensuring the reliability, safety, efficiency and environmental compliance of essential industrial equipment systems and processes would be a noble and recession-proof way to go. Alas, over the five years he had spent pursuing his degree—*for which his parents evidently sacrificed greatly* —he hadn't co-oped, interned or even visited an actual plant. He hadn't put his hands on a compressor, pump, motor, valve, bearing or seal, as far as he could remember. And don't get me started on the courses he didn't take. But then again, he really only wanted to start and run an engineering-based business...

Yup, its pretty scary out there. I'm delighted others in the working press have torn themselves away from the more popular and weighty matters of the day (i.e., where Kate Gosselin and her over-exposed brood are going; who'll be on next season's *Dancing with the Stars*; and what Snookie has been tweeting) to help the rest of us cast some light on a truly awful secret from the real world.
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jalexander@atpnetwork.com