

Lubrication Challenge: Tackling The Skilled Trades Shortage

Written by Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor
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The next 10 years could be the most critical in North America's industrial history. If you've been to a maintenance conference recently, you know the top concern is the skill trades shortage issue.

The previous 15 years have seen the continued shrinking of what was once the world's largest industrial engine—*an engine that's been literally traded to Indochina in favor of cheaper labor costs and higher profits*. This, in turn, has caused company closures, relocations and drastic cutbacks in apprenticeship training programs.

The current lack of vocational training schools and a rapidly aging skilled trades workforce seeking and planning retirement in the next 5-10 years will likely cause an immediate and catastrophic short-term skills shortage in which the situation will get worse before it gets better.

In the past, shortfalls in the skilled labor market have traditionally been shored by the importation of European expertise—*itself a rapidly shrinking market due to renewed economic wealth in Europe and the emergence of a booming global skilled trades marketplace*. In this arena, both India and China compete with North America and Europe to attract the same valuable resources. This problem has manifested itself over a long period of time and there are no simple solutions. Moreover, we should not expect our governments to resolve this situation; the answers must come from industry itself. To that end, I would like to challenge industry to view this situation as an opportunity for change.

While working on longer-term strategies and programs to train new skilled trades replacements, we must better utilize the trades we have left. The obvious way to achieving this is to drastically increase trades effectiveness and wrench time through improved planning and scheduling

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techniques. The not-so-obvious way is through the understanding and prevention of mechanical equipment failure. With up to 70% of all mechanical failures resulting from ineffective lubrication practices, it is no secret that all of the major production and maintenance philosophies and methodologies promote lubrication and cleanliness (contamination control) as a fundamental element. With the implementation of an engineered lubrication and contamination control initiative as part of a reliability program, many mechanical failures can be eliminated and dramatically reduce the need for unplanned and unscheduled skilled trade intervention.

Any good lubrication management program begins with a Lubrication Operations Effective Review (LOER) to determine the current lubrication state, set program goals and build a management action plan to close the gap. A solid program will include a lubricant consolidation process, analysis of lubricant delivery effectiveness, delivery system automation, a contamination control strategy within the storage and handling process and a condition-based lubricant change-out process based on predictive sampling. This approach will require steadfast management commitment and the upgrading of any existing "Oiler" positions in favor of new "Lubrication Specialist" positions responsible for the well-being of lubrication programs.

With significantly less time spent on lubrication and contamination-related failures, precious skilled trades resources can be better utilized. Is your company ready to take on this lubrication challenge? Good Luck! **LMT**

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