

Tackling Lean Labor

GREGG GORDON, Senior Director, Kronos



Kronos Inc. senior director Gregg Gordon's new book, *Lean Labor*, discusses practical methods for converting wasted time and expense into productive hours, resulting in a highly effective workforce. Gordon spoke with [Manufacturing Business Technology](#) [1] just prior to the book's release. He discussed the writing process, his motivations behind tackling a topic like Lean labor and what he wants his audience to take away from reading the book.

Q: Can you give me a little bit of background on *Lean Labor* and the process behind putting it together?

A: CEOs around the world have already recognized that workforce is what is going to make or break us as a company. I wanted to provide some guidance for how manufacturers can control their labor costs — especially manufacturers in high-wage companies competing against low-wage companies in places like China, Vietnam, and India.

This book is not focused specifically on innovation. It's about what has to be in place for innovation to occur, and that is fairness and equity in the workplace. If employees are seeing certain employees getting treated better than others, that kind of environment is not going to encourage innovation. So what we're doing with this book is providing the framework for equity in the workplace. You have to have that foundation before you can empower your employees to start thinking about innovative ideas. So we're trying to address those two areas — controlling costs and supporting information. They are critical to being competitive. So that's the high-level objective of the book.

The general idea was to provide, as simple as possible, a narrative story

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highlighting Graham, an operations executive at a manufacturing firm, trying to go through and improve his company's workforce management capabilities. The way the book is organized is by what I've seen in my past six years at Kronos in workforce management — the easy quick wins all the way up to the more complex, high-value workforce management techniques. It's the way I've seen a lot of our customers implement workforce management, and it's the way I've seen them be successful when their own organization is managing change.

I think almost every manufacturer can pull a couple of things out of it. Too make sure it's practical, the stories are all ones that I've seen put in place. It gives it some more credibility when people have actually done the things I'm highlighting in the book.

Q: These days there is a number of different ways to get your message out. Why did you feel writing a book was the proper vehicle to get your points across to your audience?

A: There is something about a book that has a theme, an antagonist, a beginning, and an end that allows me to tell the whole story in a way that a 600-word blog entry doesn't do. It's the one vehicle that's still comprehensive.

The challenge for workforce management is savings comes typically little bits at a time. I saw a lot of customers doing unique and innovative things to reduce their cost and improve productivity. But it didn't seem like anybody put together a real methodology on how to do that. That was the genesis of the idea, to apply Lean tools to create a methodology to extract all of the value out of the workforce.

Q: Why did you construct *Lean Labor* the way you did?

A: The reason I did it that way is because I tried writing it with more topical chapters, and everyone who read the first draft said it was extremely boring. To be perfectly blunt, it was hard to read. It was the same content, but just really hard to read. When I put it in the context of somebody living it, and maybe even simplifying it a little bit, the reaction was profound in terms of people saying it was much more readable and they could identify with Graham.

Q: How long did the process of putting together this book take you?

A: I would say about a year and a half, when it came to actual pen-to-paper work. But it's an accumulation of things. I've been in manufacturing for 10 years and in the software industry for almost 13 years. It's really an accumulation of those experiences that allowed me to write this.

Q: Every written work has a target audience. What would you say is your target audience for this book?

A: We had two kinds of people I wanted to target with this book. One was the executives, which was a reason why I picked Graham. These are the guys that can say, "Okay, we need to change our strategy and focus on workforce management."

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But I also wanted to target a mid-level manager and give them the “How.”

I wanted to write a book that would inspire someone to say, “Yes, we need to make this change.” But I also wanted to provide the tactical details of how to do that.

Q: How daunting a task was it for you to say to yourself, “I’m going to sit down and write a book on Lean labor,” being that it’s a very fluid and constantly evolving topic?

A: Lean is the “inclusive tent.” The people I deal with or talk to about Lean are more about bringing new ideas in as opposed to staying with one firm definition of what Lean is. What that allowed me to do is shrink Lean down to the pieces that apply to workforce management and suggest a few new ways you could look at it. I was able to combine workforce management and Lean and take a new slice at productivity.

Q: A person that writes a book, or even an article, often takes a lot of from that experience. What did you get out of the experience of writing this book?

A: I learned two things. One, it helped me organize my thoughts as a first-time author writing something more than three pages long. It has helped me communicate workforce management more effectively. The second thing I learned was about the richness of tools that are available out there and the experience of applying them to a new problem.

Q: What was the goal of this book project, or what was the point you were really trying to drive home with it?

A: What I wanted to do was provide readers with a vision and a path that allowed them to execute getting that next round of productivity from the workforce and in a way that doesn’t punish the workforce. I don’t think anybody wants the workforce to work harder. They want the workforce to work smarter. And my goal was to provide some practical advice to help the workforce work smarter and improve productivity.

Q: Was there anything that surprised you or caught you off guard when you were writing the book?

A: What surprised me was the realization that the small decisions made every day can have a large impact on the large decisions. It was the comparison of buying a large piece of equipment compared to making small decisions about taking an order and the processes companies have in place about the large-dollar decisions, and the lack of processes they have in place about the small decisions. The reality is the small decisions are where the processes are leaking out these days.

Q: Looking back, did the project come together the way you hoped it would? Is there anything you would have done differently?

A: I’m really pleased with the outcome. Anytime you put something together like this, you’re a little nervous about how it will be received. But so far, from the few

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people that have read it, the reception has been good. It's really helped me collect my thoughts. I can talk about all these different aspects. I've never pushed it together into one sort of theme. It's really helped me organize it, and I'm really excited to share that with other people.

For more information, please visit www.leanlaborstrategies.com [2].

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