Manufacturing’s Age-Old Problem

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I thought I knew what a deadline was in college, but when I was miraculously able to translate my English literature degree into a full-time writing job, I learned what this really meant. When someone is paying you to do something, you get it done — plain and simple.

What this occasionally means for me is long nights, early mornings and a rare summer Saturday spent getting laptop burns on my legs instead of sunburns.

These undesired extensions of my work day are the point where I mentally backtrack and try to determine ways I could have gotten a jump on this particular project. The funny thing about deadlines is they sometimes dictate how long something will take. If you’re me and a production delay awards you an additional day, you thank the media gods and go home at 5 o’clock like a normal person.

But it doesn’t always do me good in the long run. We’re all familiar with the concept of *delaying the inevitable*, and some times we get to experience the pain of its teeth in our rear ends down the line.

But it’s not so bad when the work is interesting; lucky for me, I get to learn something new each day. *IMPO* is coming up on its four-year anniversary with Advantage Business Media in July, and it’s pretty fascinating how things have changed since we first kicked off. In 2006, the issues facing manufacturers were somewhat different. And while it seems there will be issues relating to efficiency, downtime, cost controls and the like, forever, labor issues have taken on a new sheen.

Much of the decade saw numerous manufacturers wringing their hands over the

issue of retirement. The baby boomers are nearing the end of their working years, and last time I checked, the average age of a manufacturer was 53. This had left many in the industry clamoring for ideas of how to fill this impending knowledge chasm while young people increasingly turn up their noses at the industry. Not that I am all for clamor, but …

The plummeting stock and real estate markets, a tenuous social security outlook, concerns over insurance benefits and other investment misfortunes have left millions of Americans reconsidering their retirement timeframes. According to the Employee Benefit Research Institute's annual Retirement Confidence Survey, 24 percent of workers said they have postponed their planned retirement age in the past year. Does this help? Maybe … but certainly not forever.

The recession created a contagious effect relative to personal finance, and there is no way to tackle each individual labor issue, but I will say this: Despite the deadline "extension," it's dangerous for us to hit snooze on our proactive approaches to the impending baby boomer retirement. This issue has the potential to be a monumental challenge to daily operations. Even if your facility is technologically developed to the point where process and protocol are documented down to the letter, it's going to be difficult. Why? Because we always hold onto more cerebral knowledge than we realize.

I had an interesting conversation with Grainger president Mike Pulick recently, where we discussed the uncontrolled expenses that can accrue through lack of inventory management. In Grainger's experience, there were many maintenance supervisors with what Pulick referred to as "their own personal stash" of various MRO components and tools, tucked away so these folks could feel certain they'd be able to firefight in the event of a shutdown.

While this is interesting from an inventory management standpoint, I think it's even more telling relative to labor — it indicates to me that many maintenance managers have their own personal disaster (downtime) response plan, and while this is not necessarily detrimental, it could be in their absence. If they were to ever leave, we could find what's hidden in their desk drawers, but what about the elements hidden in their brains?

If we have these folks for a little longer — dire as the economic circumstances are that got us here — *take advantage of the time*. Document processes through software system advancements, or record the folks with the fastest process or assembly times. Better yet, sit down and talk to your most senior employees one on one. Figure out what works and what doesn't and *write it down*.

Speaking of writing it down, this column has served the purpose of talking me out of a lingering lunch break today. I have things to do, and my deadline is not getting any longer. I'll take my breaks on Saturday.

What else can we do to prepare manufacturing for the exit of countless boomers? Have any advice or am I worried about a non-issue? Let me know your thoughts by e-mailing me at anna.wells@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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