

“REALITY CHECK”

The Workforce

I, like many of you, have spent a lifetime dealing with this subject. Ten years managing plants and over the past 16 years I have worked hard to put good skilled operators to work in the Flexographic Printing Industry. I have put people to work in over 40 states and 20 countries, I have a lot of experience in this area, and I must tell you that today is by far the most difficult time I have ever seen when it comes to getting people to work. There are many, many reasons for this, but none are good. We have become a great state of entitlement and unearned rewards, with no change in site. Instead all I hear is, “Give away more free stuff!”.

In America over 90 million Americans have dropped out of the workforce, yet they still have what they need on a day-to-day basis. Trust me they are not suffering, in many cases they are living better than the Americans who get up every day and go to work. I was shocked to see how much help was available to those that claimed they needed it. For example, a person who qualifies for full government assistance will have the same lifestyle of a full time worker who makes \$50,000.00 a year salary. I believe to qualify for full benefits you must be 18 years old and unemployed for 6 months. This is devastating to any company trying to create a sustainable workforce that has growth potential and a solid training program.

When I started FTS I would often sit with potential students and, in many case, their parents and talk about a 4-year plan that would get them to a comfortable living wage. The fact is it takes at least 4 years, if not more, in any career before you will reach your max earnings potential. For the first 8 years this always seemed to motivate both the student and their parents. The situation we face today is drastically different. First it is almost impossible to find young people that even think about a career in the trades and the ones who do, want instant gratification. They feel they deserve top pay just for showing up. Now this is not so different than when we were young, did we not all have a little prima donna in us? You want someone that has self-confidence and is proud of their work. The big differences I see today are two fold, first I see a lot of people that are much older acting this way. It has become common place now when dealing with older students (30+) that no matter the pay the work is beneath them. I continuously hear “I am not going to get that dirty cleaning ink every day, nor do I want to have to stand all day on my feet.”. Seven years ago you would have never heard that statement from an unemployed 30-year-old, instead they would be thankful for an opportunity at such a promising career. You have to know that when the adults in the room act this way the children are going to follow and take it a step further. Second in many of our schools children are being taught that government is there for you and you should learn how to take advantage of it. This is where public education is going, big government is good and Private Corporations are bad. Public schools no longer hold students accountable or make them do anything they don’t want to. I just read a story about a school in New York City that is offering to give the students a “rosier” report card to students so they would not hurt their feelings. This in turn makes it very difficult for a young person to come out of High School and step into a job with a private company and be successful. Accountability and doing what you are told are the fundamentals of getting and holding a job.

What to do.

The good news is that not all is lost, there are still private schools, charter schools and private colleges that do not fold to the government mind set, and there are still a lot of good parents out there that refuse to let their children turn out this way. The trick is finding them, training them and keeping them.

Hiring experience

I think we will all ways have what I call “free agency” operators. (An experienced operator looking to improve their situation.) This could be a good way to bring experience in or a bad way to bring in bad habits it’s a 50/50 proposition. When bringing in experienced operators this is what I look at. Why are they looking for a job, if it’s to take advantage of an opportunity that does not exists at their current job, good reason. If it is for a .50 an hour raise, bad reason. If an operator is relocating for personal reasons and has a good work history, good reason. If they are relocating for a girlfriend or boyfriend, bad reason. The next one may seem a little out there, but it is what history has shown us. If an operator is relocating from a Northern state to a Southern state it generally works out good, but if the operator is relocating from a Southern state to a Northern state it generally does not work out well. Over all “free agency” is not the way to build a workforce, you have to do it from the draft.

Here’s what FTS has been recommending for the past couple of years that seems to work well for our members.

Hire someone local, a High School graduate, a 30-year-old that needs to improve their standing in life, and don’t be short sided. Two areas I see that companies shy away from and I know in many cases they are losing out on great employees, the first is someone who does not have a high school diploma, school does not work out for everyone, and you don’t know what environment this person was in that made them drop out. The second is someone with a record. Now I am not talking about someone with a violent history or bank robbery, but if they have a nonviolent crime record the odds are they could be great employees. Quick story. I had a student that came through the class about 8 years ago that was just great, he was 21 at the time, had a son and was very responsible. Well he had a blemish on his record and it was a felony. When he was 17 years old he and a friend got caught growing pot in the woods by their house. It was 20 plants and they were both arrested, he was from a poor home and had a court appointed attorney that just dropped the ball in my opinion, 20 plants two kids a felony for life, you have to be kidding right. I personally signed off on him getting in the class and really did not think it was a big deal. I was very wrong. When he started interviewing with companies I had at least 8 that were very interested, 5 of them were very large companies 2 midsize companies and one small plant. The five large ones the second I told them of his record they all said they could not even consider him, the two midsize ones were hesitant because they were not sure what their owners would say, and the small company could not be happier because he knew that he was going to get the chance to hire this young man that had great potential. The small company hired the student that day moved him to Arkansas and today he is their head operator. Remember lots of times giving a person a chance and believing in them is all it takes for them to reach amazing heights in their life.

Steps to build a workforce

First, let me just say you have to give all potential operators a mechanical skills test. If they cannot pass it they should not be on a press at all. About 30% of the people we test pass the test, so you need to test

a lot of people to find ones that can pass. Hire them as a general helper so you can see what kind of worker they are. (Do they get along well with others? Do they show up on time?). If at the end of 4 weeks you like their work habits, then they are worth investing time and money in. Next send them to the school for two weeks. There, they will get all the basics of running a Flexo press. We then send them back to your plant where we have an instructor from the school come in and continue their training on your press running your live work for two weeks. They will then go on their own for the next 6 weeks, we then send our instructor back to your plant to test and certify them. Hiring local means, they will stay with your company most likely and training the basics the correct way and then training on your jobs and your equipment means they are going to be able to go on their own and do well immediately. Then coming back to certify them as operators gives them a sense of accomplishment. In six months they will be some of your most accountable operators. This has been a very successful way for many of our members to get and keep operators. This will allow you to get up to 3 operators trained this way for less than the cost of an ad and relocating an operator that may or may not work out. We highly recommend you train 3 at a time, so if one doesn't work out, you still have your value. The cost for one is the same as for 3.

Make sure your workforce is comfortable

Every company should have a potential growth plan for all employees. Where they start, where they will be in six months, one year, 5 years, this type of growth plan gives everyone a sense of comfort and a good understanding of what is expected. Make your growth plan is part of your training program and in no time you will have an internal workforce program that will take you through many, many years.

It is important that when you do something like an internal training program that everyone is on the same page, especially the owner and upper management. If the operators do not like the owner they will leave sooner or later. Do not become the training plant for your competition. I know many owners and most of them are great to work for but the few I know that no one wants to work for always have issues keeping operators. Here's the thing everyone needs to realize, there are no good unemployed Flexo operators, and they will always have a job waiting. There are a lot of job openings for good operators all over the country. When I see a company that has a hard time keeping good people it usually comes down to one of two reasons. First they do not pay a competitive wage for that area doing that job, second the owner is impossible to work for. You can fix the wage gap, but fixing the owner that no one wants to work for is on the owner. Now in my career I have ran into two owners that no one wants to work for and I have to tell you after working with these owners I can't blame operators for leaving as soon as they can. Both of these shops I guarantee you that if the operators are offered an opportunity somewhere else they will take it. Trust me you don't want to be the company that no one wants to work for. I believe that a demanding hard driving boss is fine, most of the time employees respect that, as long as the owner is fair, honest and consistent. I also believe that it is not on the owner to make everyone happy, this is impossible. The way I look at it, as long as the majority of your employees are doing well and like their job than it is on the ones who are not happy to fall in line or find another job. The last thing you want to do is keep a disgruntle employee, they will contaminate the whole group.

In closing

I have to say it seems strange that we have to work so hard on getting people to take such well-paying career oriented jobs, but we do and I don't see that changing any time soon. My suggestion is work hard

on creating a sustainable workforce that wants to work for you for all the right reasons and money is the biggest part of that equation, but not the only part. Good employees recognize a good job and appreciate it.

Till next time,

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