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"WTCA Members on Labor Issues" by Melinda Caldwell

Labor issues are impacting employers across the country in industries of all kinds. As we all know, the truss industry hasn't been spared from the harsh reality of that old adage "good help is hard to find." With low unemployment rates from coast to coast and a general lack of interest in hands-on, physical labor among our nation's young people, the truss industry is scrambling to find and keep quality employees.

Of course, truss companies of all sizes are feeling the effects of these trends. It is interesting, however, to observe the specific ways this labor situation has affected smaller truss plants (those with fewer than 80 employees). There is also a lot to be learned from some of the innovative approaches these companies are taking to overcome this problem while effectively growing their businesses.

In the past month I have spoken with individuals in management at six different truss plants regarding labor and personnel issues. I'm sure no one will be surprised to hear that all six cited the difficulty in finding and keeping quality employees as the number one problem facing employers today. What was remarkable was the different ways in which the problem was affecting their plants and how they felt their situations were different from that of larger truss plants.

For example, one manufacturer who employs about 25 people voiced the problem that is often a challenge in any small company—everyone needs to know how to do more than one job. However, when turnover is high and good help is scarce, a company that relies on cross-training runs into problems. Correct techniques can get lost in the shuffle of what seems like a fast-paced game of telephone as new employees come and go. The costs of retraining increase as the need to do so increases—both production and efficiency are lost.

Other problems that arise in smaller truss plants can also be attributed to their size. It is often difficult to stay on top of all the new safety issues and OSHA requirements because the company is too small to have one person fully devoted to training. One plant manager cited problems with employees leaving because they didn't sense growth opportunities at a small company. Another found it more difficult to keep production crews busy at all times. All of these problems are only exacerbated by the industry's current labor shortage.

While the companies I spoke with are aware of their particular challenges as well as how the lack of good help intensifies those challenges, no one is naively sitting around with their fingers crossed, hoping the dilemma just disappears. All of them are taking some course of action to overcome this industry crisis. How? Let's take a look at a good example.

One general manager I talked to explained that 1999 was the first time in five years his company

didn't experience a rise in turnover. New hiring, personnel and management policies were put in place and turnover was reduced by one-third. Upper management worked toward creating a plant culture in which a mindset of continuous improvement is instilled in everyone. Quarterly reviews were instituted to make the time to discuss each employee's professional and personal development as well as review the company's focus areas—productivity, quality, safety and turnover. An incentive program was also implemented that provided bonuses based on both a team's contribution to productivity and the company's overall success, creating an atmosphere of teamwork and unity. Finally, steps were taken to re-instill discipline in the shop. Absences and tardiness were no longer tolerated and inferior workers were cut loose. The company discovered that having a delinquent worker 75% of the time was not better than having an unfilled position. In addition to this company's dramatic decrease in turnover, employee referrals are now the primary source for new hires—more proof that recent changes are creating a place people want to work.

And that's what it's all about. Make your truss plant a place where people want to work. Make it a place employees feel safe and valued. Make it a place people are proud of. One general manager defined the role of an employer this way: "An employer can't be just a boss. They also need to be part counselor, part preacher, part drill-sergeant, part doctor, part teacher and part friend." With an employer like that, why would anyone look for work elsewhere?

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