

President's Message



ROGER J. GIBBS

"The Golden Rule of Labor" by Roger J. Gibbs

At last October's Building Component Manufacturers Conference (BCMC) in Kansas City, WTCA had an open forum for manufacturers to discuss some of the key issues they face in day-to-day business operations. One of the most discussed issues was how to attract and retain quality employees. I was not surprised that this issue raised its head in a room full of truss manufacturers. I believe one of the biggest challenges for the manufacturing industry in general and the truss industry in particular, is the ability to find and keep good employees. This trend is affecting many of the trades as well. Today's kids are told to get a higher education—to use their heads instead of their hands. Many of us are no different; we work hard to be able to send our kids to college for this very reason. But the unfortunate result is that carpenters, masons and other craftsmen are approaching the brink of extinction. Everyone I talk to is asking the same question: Where can we go to find good help?

Statistics show that two percent of the population is unemployable and in many areas today the unemployment rate is close to or below that two percent mark. In most cases, the people who answer the classified ads we place in the newspaper are currently unemployed. Then we are left with the question, are they even employable? We may interview ten people and hire four of them, only to find out a month later that we only retained one of the original four—if we were lucky. It's no wonder everyone is struggling with high turnover rates on new hires.

So, what are some ways to address this critical situation? The four options I've outlined below are all being put into practice in some form or another by manufacturers across the country—either to their benefit or detriment, you be the judge. I think you will agree with me that only one of these options has any real staying power when it comes to growing your business.

OPTION #1: PRETEND THE PROBLEM DOESN'T EXIST

This is probably the easiest choice when it comes to any problem you can face, and it will have one of two outcomes. This time next year either you'll be complaining about the same concerns—only they'll be worse—or you'll be closing down your business, because the problem you failed to recognize finally beat you.

OPTION #2: STAY YOUR COURSE

A slightly more realistic cousin of option #1, this course of action at least recognizes that a

problem exists, but fails to take a proactive stand against it. Instead, just plod along like you have been, doing damage control as needed, letting your staff dwindle until you have to scale down your business due to lack of personnel. Your future will look a lot like the outcome of option #1.

OPTION #3: GO HIGH TECH

Turn toward more automation so you can reduce the amount of labor per the output of product. Now there is nothing wrong with the essence of this idea. The truss industry has benefited a great deal from advances in technology and machinery innovations and will continue to do so in the future. However, taken to an extreme, the attempt to replace people with machines has the potential to make the labor shortage situation even worse. You cannot just plug your truss plant in to one big electrical socket and expect machines to take care of everything. No matter how advanced technology becomes, you will always need good people to make your business successful. If you create an environment that revolves around machines, it won't necessarily be one in which you can keep good employees either.

OPTION #4: DRAW PEOPLE IN & MAKE THEM WANT TO STAY

To find the kind of quality people we need to keep our plants running efficiently, we are going to need to draw people into the truss industry from other businesses. Consider changes to your compensation and benefits package and create an attractive, rewarding work environment that your present employees are proud to be a part of—so much so they want their friends to work there as well. A good referral is the best kind of advertising. Once you have attracted these new individuals, ensure that they are sufficiently educated about the truss industry and properly trained for the job they've been hired to do. An individual who has been equipped to do a good job will be more confident, responsible and productive.

PUT THE GOLDEN RULE TO WORK

The wise option is clear. We won't be able to change this labor problem until we create smart solutions to bring people into our companies. Ultimately, I believe the number one goal is to create a place at which people are proud to work. That pride will help hold your staff and your company together.

So how do you do this? Put yourself in the worker's shoes for a moment and think about what you would be looking for in a job: Can I raise a family and sustain/improve my current quality of life? Do I get meaningful benefits? Is there job stability? Is it a reputable company? Do I have a chance for advancement?

As an employer, what kind of employees do you want? Long-term employment? Good attendance? Individuals with family values who take pride in their workmanship and their company? If these are the people you are looking for, I can almost guarantee that they are looking for the same basic things you would be if you were in their shoes.

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