



Working for Your Workers

Homegrown Truss Technicians

What's the solution to finding, training and retaining truss technicians? Find some answers in *SBC's* newest column.

by Sean D. Shields

When it comes to truss technicians, there really is no substitute for someone who can do the job well. How do you find these promising individuals? The answers are as varied as the markets component manufacturers sell products in.

However, one method has the greatest potential for meeting the industry's need for technicians: hiring and training locally, also referred to as the "homegrown" method. In general, this consists of working with your local high school or technical college and encouraging a talented student with an interest in the construction industry to come and work at your facility, or hiring and training a current employee from within.

Steve Kloss, Automated Building Components, has successfully utilized this method for years. "Most of my designers are from the local technical college, but two of them came from the shop and just worked their way up," he said.

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The first key to developing a successful homegrown technician method is to determine the source and size of your pool of potential candidates. Successful component manufacturers have gone out to their local high school's industrial arts program, tech school construction design and architecture classes, and even the local work force center. Other manufacturers, like Kloss, have been successful searching within their own plant.

The next step is to determine which individuals may have an aptitude for component design. One method commonly used is administering WTCA's Technical Assessment Test Online (TATO). If the individual scores well on the test, they're likely someone worth spending the time to recruit and train. If they score low, signifying they may have difficulty grasping some of the technical aspects of the component design process, they are probably better suited for a different career.

Once you have identified and developed a source of competent individuals and weeded out those who seem unlikely to succeed in this career path, training is your biggest investment. Many component manufacturers that use this method have found putting homegrown technicians through WTCA's Truss Technician Training (TTT), Level I, is a straightforward way to give them a strong foundation. Afterward, many manufacturers combine plate supplier-specific training (live or online) on component design software with in-plant mentoring alongside production and technical department employees.

The homegrown method has three primary advantages:

1. Technicians trained and mentored from within cost significantly less than those hired through alternative methods.
2. Inexperienced technicians present an absence of "bad habits," or a "clean slate" with which to nurture and train.

3. Individuals who lack design experience are significantly more plentiful in your local market, generally have a desire to live where they have strong ties and are consequently more likely to grow into this profession with your company.

"We have been successful with our homegrown technicians; one reason is they come up through the ranks, and the pay is competitive with the typical salaries for these jobs in our industry, but is a lot less than the inflated pay scales produced by headhunters in the open market," says Keith Azlin, Sun State Components.

The most immediate advantage to utilizing the homegrown method of hiring technicians is that you are not held hostage when your business has an immediate hiring need. If you are constantly searching for local talent, and subsequently have several options in mind to fill your needs, you will be able to build the technical portion of your staff in a way that keeps your costs in line with your competitor's costs, while providing a professional growth environment that is beneficial for the employee and a benefit for you through the long-term.

You also provide an intrinsic motivator for your other employees who may be interested in pursuing this level of responsibility. Hiring from within also guarantees that individual will know a great deal about the company and the product before designing their first component.

Along these lines, homegrown technicians present a clean slate for you to train on your company's practices and products. Priscilla "Perky" Becht, Chambers Truss, explained why they exclusively use the homegrown method: "Experienced technicians come with a lot of baggage they've picked up from their other places of employment. Unfortunately, they're usually bad habits. We also have a specific way of doing things here, and we don't want someone who's going to do it their way, we want them to do it our way."

Ben Hershey, Alliance TruTruss, echoed this sentiment, stating simply, "I prefer homegrown technicians because they are easier to teach, and they're not focused on job hopping."

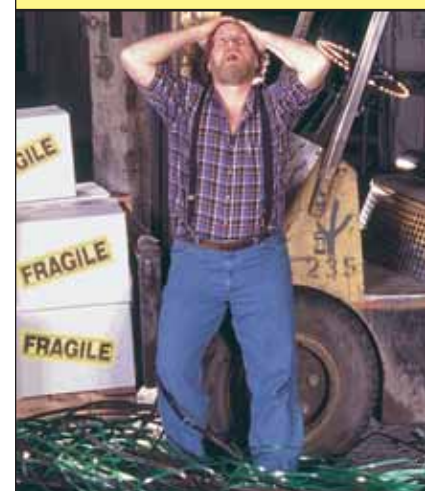
This brings up the third advantage of the homegrown method—loyalty. Not only is the pool of individuals with aptitude yet with no prior industry experience significantly larger than the pool of experienced truss technicians, you are more likely to find more possibilities in your own back yard.

Hiring locally, through a school, work force board or your own company, will drastically increase the chances that person has a strong tie to the community and will stay around for a while. Steve Kloss summed it up saying, "trying to find experienced truss technicians is like finding a needle in the haystack. Potential technicians who come through head hunters are more apt to leave six months down the line because they are hooked on change and not settling down, whereas if they come to you on their own with ties to a local community they're likely to stay."

Finally, the homegrown technician method has one additional advantage, not only for you, but for the industry. As Hershey emphatically stated, "[unscrupulous] management recruiters and head hunters have been absolutely detrimental to our industry." By adopting this method over others, you can enhance the value of our industry within the communities you operate through identifying local talent and encouraging them to become employed in our industry, while at the same time curbing the ill-will created through the practice of hiring truss technicians away from fellow component manufacturers. **SBC**

In the next issue of SBC Magazine, this column will explore ways component manufacturers have successfully promoted their companies to the community.

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at a glance

- ❑ Hiring and training locally, also referred to as the "homegrown" method, has the greatest potential for meeting the industry's need for technicians.
- ❑ Many potential technicians can be found in the local technical college, and some may start in the shop and work their way up.
- ❑ Component manufacturers have been successful with employing homegrown technicians; one reason is they come up through the ranks, and the pay is competitive with the typical salaries for these jobs in the industry.

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