



Working for Your Workers

Tricks of the Trade

Hot new workforce development trend: go back to school!

by Sean D. Shields

You can't teach an old dog new tricks. However, those of you who stay up late to watch David Letterman probably know that if you start young enough, you can teach a dog to balance on a beach ball while whining the "The Star-Spangled Banner." What does this teach us? The young mind can learn just about anything before it's been cluttered with a lifetime of experience. You can take advantage of this fact.

One of the single most important steps you can take as a manufacturer to immediately improve your workforce situation is to develop a working relationship with your local community colleges, technical schools and universities. It is never too early to start; even high schools can be a rich source of young minds eager to learn the skills necessary to become employable. As was pointed out in the column a few months ago, students coming out of these educational institutions are "clean slates" waiting for you to fill their heads with your own personal tricks of the trade.

"Having a relationship with our local high school is great because every time we have an opening, we have the ability to bring in new blood," says Priscilla "Perky" Becht, Chambers Truss.

Chambers Truss has built a relationship with the drafting teacher at their local high school. First, they sold the school district a drafting printer at a discount in order for the students to be able to take computer generated plans and print out building schematics. They've taken that relationship further by inviting the drafting students into their facility to observe designers and production staff at work. Some of the students also earn class credits for working in the plant after school.

This arrangement has produced results. Perky pointed out, "We hired one young man out of there and kept him for ten years; another young lady we had for more than four."

Relationships with colleges are important, not only because of the many career fairs and job expos they host, but also for the opportunity for you to speak to a classroom of attentive students about the many rewarding careers in the structural building components industry.

Bruce Bain of Richco Structures has literally gone from the back of the classroom to the front of it at his local technical college. First, he attended classes there, and now he gives presentations on the structural building components industry to groups of architectural students. Bruce's volunteerism is at least partially responsible for the fact that nearly half of Richco's technical staff have been hired from local technical schools.

"I'd contact the instructor and offer to give a presentation on what our company manufactures and what we require of our truss technicians," says Bruce. "I've then been able to go back to that instructor to get recommendations on the brightest students they have and whether they may be a fit for Richco."

Through the years of involvement, Bruce was invited to serve on one of the technical school's curriculum advisory committees. As a committee member, he gets a

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at a glance

- ❑ Relationships with high schools are great because they can bring in new blood into a company.
- ❑ Bruce Bain of Richco Structures gives presentations at the local technical college that he graduated from.
- ❑ Keith Azlin has been working with WTCA-Arizona to set up an internship program between the two ITT Technical Institutes and component manufacturers.

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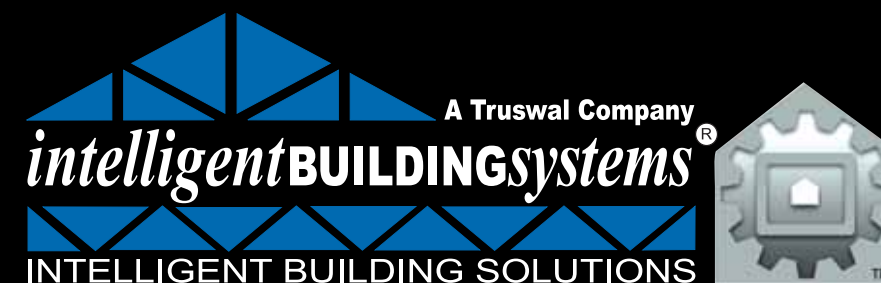
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unique opportunity to give recommendations on what the students are taught. In addition, he is able to interview students to get their evaluations of the instructors.

Bruce shared, "You get a better understanding of the environment in which these kids are learning, and you get a good picture of the quality of the various instructors. You begin to target the promising students coming out of the classrooms of the instructors you trust."

Arranging internships through the career and counselor offices of your local schools is also a win-win-win situation for you, the student and the institution. Keith Azlin, U.S. Components, has been working diligently with his chapter, WTCA-Arizona, to set up an internship program between the two ITT Technical Institutes in the Phoenix area and component manufacturers in that part of Arizona.

"The goal is to get them out of the AutoCAD or structural design course and get them working with industry design software," says Keith. "We're all looking for help, and this is a really easy place to find it."

In the end, this is what it's really all about—finding the employees you need to get the job done and keep your customers coming back for more. You can spend a lot of capital and time searching far and wide for someone with a year or two of "experience" at another plant, or you can save some of that money and invest your time in building relationships with your local schools to find a steady and long-term source of promising employees. **SBC**

In the August issue, this column will explore the other side of your workforce by discussing the potential implications national immigration reform may have on your supply of production employees.

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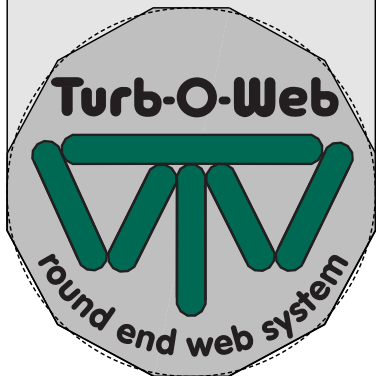
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