Combating the Talent Gap With Targeted Training

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From machinist to toolmaker, the demand for skilled workers has never been higher. Manufacturers in industries from food to pharmaceuticals and from automotive to aerospace, struggle to find the talented workforce needed to fill jobs currently available, much less in the future.

In fact, a survey conducted by SME found that nine out of 10 manufacturers are having difficulty finding skilled workers, which is impacting production, quality and innovation. Sixty percent of survey respondents said the gap in skilled labor has impacted their company's ability to grow.

While the skilled worker shortage is being felt now, fueled by factors including retiring baby boomers and reshoring, the impact is expected to be even greater at the end of the decade. According to The Boston Consulting Group, without aggressive action, the next decade is expected to bring a potential shortfall of 875,000 machinists, welders, industrial-machinery mechanics, and industrial engineers.

To combat the current and pending talent gap and build a high-performance team,

some manufacturers are increasingly turning to competency models – a structured system to develop the needed knowledge, skills and abilities for specific jobs.

By instituting a training program, including competency models, tied directly to the bottom line, companies can ensure they remain competitive. Companies using such training programs can experience tangible benefits, such as improved quality, cycle time, communications, reliability and safety, and reduced costs and downtime.

Surprisingly, despite these tangible business benefits, more than half of manufacturers say they do not have a plan to address the skilled labor shortage. While employers invest in equipment, tooling and materials, they often neglect to make a similar investment in their employees. However, if workers do not keep up with technological advances, the whole structure moves out of balance. A well-trained employee will more effectively utilize the capability of new equipment, leading to increased innovation and productivity.

Competency models are one way to develop systems that allow people coming into the manufacturing environment as well as the incumbent workforce to have the needed knowledge, skills and abilities for specific jobs. Putting this structure in place is paramount to enable high-performing workers to achieve business goals.

Getting Started

The first step to building or improving a competency-based learning program is for human resources to work with production and operations managers to develop job descriptions that accurately define the qualifications needed by workers, and include both knowledge and skills.

This front-end analysis provides the foundation for a program that meets a company’s objectives related to budget, consistency, measurability and results, and a program that can be instituted across an organization regardless of size and number of locations.

Throughout the process, it is important to secure commitment from top management down to the individual employee level, and to enact a communication plan that will serve as a road map toward specific outcomes.

An effective training program will include a validation process that not only tests a new skill but also continues to build on it. Tying competencies to a measurement system allows management to see the pay-off over time.

Competency Framework for Manufacturing Excellence

To address these challenges, Tooling U-SME brought together a cross-section of manufacturing experts to create a new industry resource, Competency Framework for Manufacturing Excellence. The Competency Framework features a series of competency models in nine manufacturing functional areas and is made up of more than 60 job role competency models. Competency models like these allow companies to combat the increasing talent shortage and achieve stronger

performance from their workforce while providing development pathways and career growth opportunities for employees.

Companies are already seeing measurable results. For instance, one North American manufacturer wanted to develop flexible technical workers into full performers in production roles across the globe. Following a job analysis to define knowledge and skills required by the full performance level of production workers, Tooling U-SME developed a competency framework and designed curriculum elements to include a standardized blended program of online, classroom, simulated work and on-the-job training. Additionally, a communication model was developed for implementing competencies through the enterprise at the individual plant level. Using the competency framework, workers achieved competency 60 percent faster than with standard training programs, which resulted in productivity gains and cost savings.

As the U.S. manufacturing industry continues to grow, the pressure to find and develop skilled workers will continue to increase. Companies start addressing workforce challenges today, using tools such as competency models, will retain a competitive advantage for years to come.

Jeannine Kunz is managing director of workforce and education at SME, where she leads a team dedicated to the ongoing education of the manufacturing workforce. A recognized expert in the field of professional development and training, her vision and dedication have put Kunz at the forefront of workforce management issues as she provides forward-thinking educational innovations and solutions for companies, academia and individuals. Tooling U-SME, a division of SME, can be found at www.toolingu.com or on Facebook (www.facebook.com/toolingu) and Twitter (www.twitter.com/toolingu).

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