


Labor Day Or Talent Day?

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One thing about holidays is that once they become official, they hang around. Who has not enjoyed many a picnic—fried chicken, barbeque and potato salad—on the summer holidays of Memorial Day, July Fourth and Labor Day? These are great American traditions. However, I would like to see one particular American holiday go away or at least get a name change. That holiday is Labor Day.

Labor Day was created in the 1880s as a tribute to and recognition of “the contribution of the Working Man.” According to the U.S. Department of Labor Web site, “The vital force of labor added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our traditional ideals of economic and political democracy.”

I don't really have much of a grievance with that. But 1882-thinking aside, in the precision machining industry today, some 126 years later, we don't really use a lot of “labor.” What we employ is talent. We employ skilled, talented people that can make production decisions and be responsible for their own quality. This talent can set up and operate high-tech, sophisticated equipment, whether it is a cam or computer controlled.

Our employees aren't only moving parts and material around in space;

they are achieving 100 percent on-time deliveries to customers, just-in-time, all around the globe. They use the latest computer technologies to keep track of customer needs, maintain kanbans and improve their processes, in short, to add value.

Our current managers aren't like the overseers and foremen back in the 1880s either. Today, the need for communications, team skills, hands-on leadership and problem-solving has never been higher. The people who bring only their hands and not their talents to work are essentially unarmed in today's modern workplaces. We need far more than only “labor” if we are to remain competitive in today's global market.

If I can't get the “powers that be” to change the name of the holiday, I'd like to propose that each of us takes a thoughtful look at how we use the term “labor” in our shops—not out of some inflated need to be politically correct, but out of a concern that our language and choice of words should better reflect our current reality, not the reality of the years before the bolt-action rifle.

How do we look at labor in our shops? Is it a cost to be minimized? Is it a necessary evil? Do you consider labor to be simply a “chargeable factor” in your pricing equation? Is labor something we sell—a labor hour? Or is labor really a key input variable to your competitiveness equation—the factor that makes the difference between getting a job at a profit versus a no-quote?

In your shop, I would bet that talent—what we so easily call labor—

is, in fact, the difference between profit and loss, between parts that conform to specification and those that need inspection.

When I think of the contributions of the people that have worked for me—engineers, technicians, machinists, machine operators, maintenance people, supervisors and clerks—I do not see their contributions as labor. I see our collective success as a result of these people applying their talents to the problems that we had to solve to take care of our customers.

So, when Labor Day arrives, it's OK to recognize it as a sign that it's the end of summer. It's OK to have it remind you that Jerry's Kids still need your support. It's all right if it makes you ask, “Hey, whatever happened to that Southern 500 race that used to be held on Labor Day in Darlington?”

Labor Day is a good reminder that it is probably time to put the summer duds away. We probably won't be needing those shorts, tank tops or sandals that much longer, global warming or not.

But when you hear the word “labor” in Labor Day, won't you take only a second to think about, and be thankful for the fact that, in the precision machining industry, it's the talent of our people that we really celebrate and that we employ to highest and best use?

Happy Talent Day everyone! Now, would someone mind passing that bowl of potato salad around this way? Who has the remote?

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