

Context —The Missing Key to Workforce Development

Upskilling your current workforce is as important as finding new talent. To expose them to experiences that encourage them to become problem-solvers is imperative.



The need for skilled workforce in our shops is universally recognized, and many of us are doing all we can to bring in the next wave of talent for our shops. But the workforce issue isn't just the lack of or need for new employees. It is also how do we increase the skill and knowledge of our existing performers?

Context

When people start a job, they are given training, work instructions and cursory information that will be needed to perform the tasks assigned. Perhaps there are even visual aids to go along with the work instructions. This training, the habits of following the work instructions, and experience with the process, allows the performer to gain confidence and competence, and they then become capable of increasing the scope of their duties and doing other ancillary tasks.

Eventually, after sufficient time, the performer becomes relatively independent and able to share their experience and perhaps even train others.

However, their knowledge is strictly experiential. Parochial. Limited strictly to the experience and inputs of their workplace. They know the “what” of their job, the “how” to perform the tasks assigned, but they lack broader context of the entire value chain and how their work fits within that broader system.

Workforce development efforts that focus strictly on attracting new talent to our shops abandons existing talent by failing to give them the broader context for their work. That broader context can upgrade the performer's understanding to become knowledgeable, not just competent, at their responsibilities and authorities.

How?

“How does it get to me?” is probably the first step to be taken to broaden a performer's knowledge. A strong argument could also be made for “How does the customer use my product?” being a higher priority. Both of these questions expand the role and the world view from the performer's shop-centric focus to a broader understanding of where they are, and how the value that they add matters in the value chain.

How the raw material is produced, packaged, and identified is crucial information if the performer is to be able to critically think about resolving issues when material is issued to a job but some important factor seems “off.” More than noting the discrepancy, the performer needs to exercise judgement whether or not to proceed, how to cope or what adjustments or actions might need to be taken in order to continue to operate.

But there is more to a broader understanding than just raw materials. A change in how tools are provided —different coating, hone, or switch from one style of insert to another is an area where the performer needs more insight into the sourcing and the source processes — if they are to respond effectively to the change. Traditionally, many of us think that this ability to respond effectively is built from experience, but doing the same job the same way with the same materials and tools repetitively is not experience, it is repetition. To gain flexibility, they need to see and learn all of their options.

Experience is More Than Time on Task

Our current performers have years of experience — but often that “experience” is just a repetition of the same things, day over day, month after month, year after year. Our annual National Technical Conference gives performers a chance to consider new perspectives, new ways of doing things, and learning from their peers. At PMTS, performers are able to



get out of their limited environment and see a broad range of tools, software, machines, materials, fluids and other products and services to consider the next time one of those “no-quote” opportunities arrive.

By ensuring this next generation of problem-solvers sees where their cutting tools, where their machine tools and where the raw materials come from, they can confidently, and factually approach whatever issues arise. Not with just tribal history, and anecdote, but based on the facts that they saw first-hand in the processes at each supplier.

Having one day of experience repeated 365 times is not necessarily the same thing as a year of experience. What are you doing to break the cycle of repetition and take off the blinders that being limited to a single workplace can do to your performers? Our performers deserve the chance to see their place in the entire value chain. To see how the tools,

materials, and technology that they use is created and get to them. And why they should be confident in their suppliers.

The workforce development issue is all too often limited to “where do we find workforce?” That question is missing the point. What and how are we empowering our existing talent to achieve their highest and best use? At PMPA, we believe that our existing talent is truly our most valuable. Investing in giving them context into their tools and suppliers and materials will pay huge dividends in increased understanding, freedom from superstition, and create a foundation for disciplined team-oriented problem-solving.

To develop the skills and thinking of our workforce, why not start with broadening their context? Their understanding of the importance of their work in the entire value chain? Why wouldn't you want to do this? ⊕

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Listen to Miles Free III and Carli Kistler-Miller discuss the immersive precision machining experiences which were held in Cleveland, Ohio in August 2021: National Technical Conference, Mastery Program and PMTS.



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