

GCPTA strives to fill pipeline with process technology graduates

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It might sound a little strange to hear that manufacturing executives in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi are helping competitors address their work force challenges. But it makes perfect sense when you think about it. This is one way that industry can make sure it has a strong, skilled and trained work force. And if we don't meet this goal, it's possible that many of us will end up not having the process operators we're going to need in the future.

For 12 years, I have been a member of the Gulf Coast Process Technology Alliance (GCPTA), which is comprised of industry representatives and education providers. We are the regional association responsible for developing, improving and maintaining the standardized process technology (PTEC) curriculum at colleges in three Gulf Coast states.

Until recently, the GCPTA's main duty was to audit PTEC degree programs and endorse those that met its criteria. (Fifteen colleges in Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana have received the GCPTA endorsement.)

The problem is that there are not enough PTEC graduates to replace an aging work force. The average age of a process operator is 50, which means that as many as half of all process operators could retire in the next five to 10 years. So, when you have a good product but people aren't buying enough of it, what do you do? You advertise.

So the GCPTA is telling its PTEC story to one company at a time. We're e-mailing, writing and calling companies so we can have a sit-down appointment with them. And our message is pretty blunt and straightforward — hiring PTEC graduates to fill process operator jobs will make a significant, positive difference in your company's bottom line.

And how do we sell companies on PTEC? Well, first we ask questions. What is the age of their existing work force, and how many of them might be leaving in the next three to seven years? Where will their replacements come from, and how much is it going to cost to get them on board and trained? What percentage of these newly hired and newly trained workers should you expect to lose for one reason or another? What would it be worth to your company to decrease employee-selection costs by 80-90 percent, reduce two-year new employee turnover by 50 percent, drop job-training costs by 40 percent, and at the same time incur 37 percent fewer safety-related incidents and increase plant asset utilization by 1-4 percent?

We then provide them with the facts. For example, we tell them about an API study that analyzed all factors that affect a plant's efficiency and the type of failures that prevent plants from running at peak efficiency. According to the study, human error caused the most unplanned events and had the highest bottom-line impact on asset utilization. We point out that an American Chemical Society study concluded that when plants hire qualified, trained workers — such as PTEC graduates — job-training costs dropped by 40 percent, safety-related incidents decreased by 37 percent and companies reaped an average savings of \$16,000 in initial training costs for every new hire made.

Of course, companies are interested in examples of where this has been put into practice, so we tell them about a well-known chemical company currently on its way to realizing \$40 million in savings by hiring PTEC graduates.

Our goal is that one day industry will establish the PTEC degree as a requirement for process technology operators. As long as new employees are hired without the degree requirement, enrollment in the college programs will be less than what is needed to fill the jobs. And that means that the benefits the programs provide will not be realized. Once companies are convinced of the benefits and take that next step, we believe that enrollments will increase toward a condition where supply will meet demand, and we will reap the benefits of a better prepared work force.

So, why are we helping each other deal with work force issues? Well, if we don't work together to make sure there are enough trained workers available, then we're all going to be playing a frantic game of musical chairs among employers. And in that scenario, there are going to be winners and losers. Nobody should be left out, but we have to work as a team to make sure there is a solution for industry as a whole. And it's to everyone's benefit to make sure that we all end up winners.

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