

Workforce sustainability in the process industry: Is there an experience gap?

By Tom O'Banion



During a recent customer advisory board meeting at Emerson's Micro Motion, one of the top three issues brought up by participants from the food, beverage, chemical, oil and gas, and refining industries was workforce sustainability. When we asked for more detail, the advisory board members specifically voiced concerns that as older workers retire, tribal knowledge is getting lost. It is not being transferred to the new and younger replacements. The new hires are unaware of measurement instrumentation capabilities and how to maintain or troubleshoot the equipment in their plants. Due to this

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knowledge gap, companies in the process industry are asking for more training from their instrument vendors. This training is being delivered in multiple ways via on-site, factory, and web-based venues.

Process industries in the U.S. have seen a decline in total employment during the past 20 years. For instance, the approximate number of total employees in the U.S. chemical sector fell from about 923,000 to about 790,000 between January 2003 and January 2013 (U.S. Department of Labor, www.isa.org/link/USDOL). During this period, production volume doubled—and productivity and global competitiveness increased—which was all good for the industry. However, after two decades with little or no hiring

and workforce attrition, an unanticipated experience gap developed. With the lack of hiring, some companies who were previously famous for their training and development greatly reduced or eliminated their technical training for new employees.

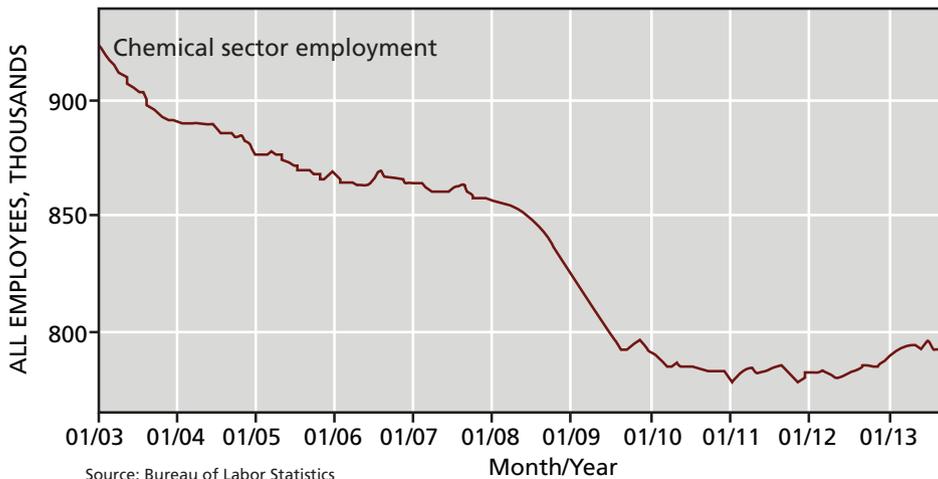
More recently, we have seen a substantial number of retirements in these industries and an increase in hiring. This experience gap has driven a renewed focus on training and development and caused companies to rely on their suppliers for assistance.

We are also starting to see that our customer's equipment is aging. Much of their instrumentation and control equipment was purchased years ago. The newer employees—while on average better educated—are much less familiar with these legacy devices.

This aging workforce is not just a problem for the process industry; this is a trend that is starting to play out across many industries and markets. It is important to embrace this change and work together to find ways to fix it. Training is a great way to overcome this phenomenon. Companies with employees who need development and training should closely align with vendors and groups, such as local colleges and universities. If they can work together to identify the training needs and develop a curriculum that combines online and classroom training, everyone wins.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom O'Banion (tom.obanion@emerson.com) is the director of global chemical industry marketing for Micro Motion, and has been with them since 1987 in a variety of marketing and sales roles. These roles include greenhouse gas compliance, process and natural gas marketing development, and technical sales management covering Canada, Taiwan, and mainland China. He holds a B.S. degree in chemical engineering degree from the University of Colorado and an MBA from the University of Denver. Previous employers include Conoco Oil and MW Kellogg (now KBR). He is a "retired" triathlete and competitive runner.



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November/December © 2013 ISA Services, Inc.