

MAINTENANCE— 'THE HEART OF OUR BUSINESS'

Maintenance/engineering pros assess the impact of digital PMs, recruitment and training trends and more

By Jack Morgan

Having a thorough maintenance program in a plant is so fundamental that anything less sets up your linen, uniform or facility services operation for defeat. That's the take several operators we spoke with had on the need for a proactive emphasis on keeping machinery and systems not only running, but processing textiles at maximum efficiency and ensuring that customers get timely deliveries of quality goods.

"There is really nothing more important than predictive/preventive maintenance in maintaining the maximum effectiveness of an operation," says Jim Curiale, director of engineering for Unitex Healthcare Laundry Services,

Elmsford, NY. "Once you remove those components from the equation, all you are doing is 'run to fail.' Fixing a machine that has failed due to lack of maintenance is not really 'maintenance'—it is a band-aid fix to allow you to keep running at reduced effectiveness and allow the machine to continue to deteriorate."

Unitex is a regional healthcare launderer with 13 plants and 1,900 employees serving more than 7,000 customers across the northeast U.S. While the size of an operation could further emphasize the need for a systematic approach to maintenance, keeping machinery and systems in top condition is critical for operators of any size, says consultant W. Kirby Wagg of Performance Matters, Columbia, SC. "It's so important to have your maintenance book/software up to date. Scheduled (weekly, EOW/E4 weeks) maintenance must be done to properly operate a laundry, no matter how small or large." Wagg also has extensive experience as an operator, having overseen Wagg's Linen and Uniform, Orillia, ON, Canada,

for many years (see related article, pg. 34).

Paul Jewison, vice president of engineering and general manager of Textile Care Services (TCS), Rochester, MN, agrees that proper maintenance is vital to the success of any laundry operation. To that end, TCS, which is affiliated with the Healthcare Linen Services Group (HLSG), St. Charles, IL, recently implemented a new electronic-maintenance alert system to make sure that staff provide the upkeep necessary to keep the plant running smoothly and efficiently. "This is an interesting topic for me right now in my location and in my career and in the business," he says, noting that HLSG operates 20 facilities in the Midwest with 2,200 employees and 2,000 customers. "I'm getting into and growing with private equity, and we've tried different systems before. But now we're using CMMS (computerized maintenance management system) software and they have E-maintenance.

The CMMS program that TCS uses provides automatic alerts to maintenance

staff when they need to check various pieces of equipment for malfunctioning and/or to replace worn-out parts to keep the machine running in top form. Maintenance teams can conduct this process manually, but they run the risk that human error or emergency breakdowns will delay the performance of routine maintenance. The challenge with CMMS programs, however, is that they require an up-front effort by staff or contractors (sometimes including interns or part-timers) to catalogue each piece of equipment and its key components.

That information is then fed into the CMMS program, along with maintenance recommendations from the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to establish a time-based alert system for staff to perform upkeep. This is a laborious process that has discouraged some companies from adopting CMMS programs. In TCS's case, the CMMS vendor provided timely assistance with this process. "That all was part of the program," Jewison says. "They subcontracted a company to come out and name all of our equipment. So it all has a number and a name." Next, TCS staff loaded the information into the program. The vendor gave them an electronic version of the data, so that TCS no longer has to rely on paper records that they could lose or misplace. "There is a decent amount of setup," he says. "For example, we had to ask for them to e-mail us those maintenance specifications in an electronic form. Now, on each machine, we have it all loaded into our electronic CMMS program." TCS still uses print documents as well, but if any are lost, they can easily reprint them, he says.

While establishing the CMMS program took time and resources, the system is earning significant return on investment for TCS, "We've been into it about three years now," Jewison says. "It's definitely paid off. You can tell in our uptime. In fact, I don't think our productivity has ever been better than it is now," Jewison says.

Embracing preventive maintenance won't necessarily uncover all problems, but it greatly reduces the need for "reactive maintenance" due to random breakdowns, he says. "Of course, the more preventive maintenance you do, the less reactive maintenance you do. And the more uptime you have." That translates to improved efficiency, quality, on-time deliveries and, typically, better staff morale. Having

a preventive-maintenance program is a plus for recruiting staff as well. If a company isn't paying attention to preventive maintenance, it raises questions among candidates with tech backgrounds. "So if they come to work for you, and you don't have a preventive-maintenance program. They look kind of like they're still in the dark ages," Jewison says.

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TRSA Launches Tech Training Initiative

TRSA recently began a partnership with TPC Training, a leader in industrial training and workforce management solutions, to offer a

new online educational program for maintenance-tech professionals. This online training initiative will enable laundry maintenance staff to broaden their knowledge, without having to leave the plant. The online training program offers tiered levels: Maintenance Tech 1 and 2 and Maintenance Manager. This curriculum addresses the essential topics and skills necessary for success in the maintenance field, such as electrical, mechanical systems, process controls, energy conservation and more. Trainees will also learn how to troubleshoot, repair and maintain various types of equipment and machinery. Click bit.ly/Mcertify for the Maintenance Certificate Program.

For Unitex, the focus is on daily upkeep after the production staff leaves, so that when they arrive the next day, any issues from the previous day are already resolved. “In every Unitex plant, we employ a fully staffed shift of preventive-maintenance technicians who work each day when the plants have completed their production day, doing nothing but predictive/preventive maintenance,” Curiale says. “The staffing is equivalent to or greater than the technical staff that is in the plants during the normal production day. The philosophy we live by is that when the production shift comes in the next morning, they have a ‘new plant’ every day.”

STAFFING ISSUES

While proactive-maintenance programs—whether manual or computer-driven—are helpful, someone still must complete the tasks that the preventive-maintenance program directs them to do. In today’s competitive market for maintenance staff, it’s challenging to find qualified technicians, according to the managers we contacted. Wagg notes that currently, staff shortages in all areas of laundry operations are the rule, rather than the exception. He suggests networking

with employees and pursuing recently discharged military veterans to help address staff vacancies, including those for maintenance technicians. “All staff are difficult to find today,” Wagg says. “However, you must be proactive and have a culture of communicating with each team member. Engaging with all members will prove to be profitable, as your team will be your recruiters: They will know someone who can help you. Also, former armed forces veterans are proving to be valuable. They have excellent training already.”

Jewison says he’s had good luck locating and hiring maintenance staff by reaching out to the Rochester Technical Community College to offer temporary jobs in plant maintenance to students preparing for technical careers. “The key for us in this market and actually all markets is to have some kind of connection to your local vocational school, if there is one” he says. “Try to get them to co-op. Have them come over during the year. Maybe work a few hours a week and you get to know the people; they get to know the process. Even if they don’t stay with you after the semester, maybe in a couple of years they’ll come back. Because they tried a couple of other jobs, and they like the opportunity. So you’ve always

got to be planting seeds out there to keep maintenance staff coming back.”

TCS’s two-day-a-week “apprentice” program has worked well for the company, he says, noting that roughly half of the students who work for a semester while also attending vocational classes, typically come back to work full-time for TCS. “What I do is I usually pay them production wages for this,” says Jewison, noting that he’ll take up to three apprentices per semester. “We’re not obliged to pay them because they’re co-oping. They’re just basically ‘shadowing.’ But I always pay production wages because it’s their time. And I’m hoping that one of these guys will stay with us.”

Not all companies have had as smooth an experience with apprenticeship programs as TCS. Curiale says that in the northeast, finding technical talent via trade or vocational schools or high schools has fallen short because these institutions are focused on training people for jobs in auto-related industries and other traditional trades, rather than commercial laundries. He says educators and policy makers at various levels have failed to encourage young people to pursue the kind of “hands-on” work that laundry maintenance people do daily. “Unfortunately, we have a societal problem that we are dealing with that we seem to have little control over. In the last three decades, we have somehow made traditional hands-on technical jobs undesirable and have actively shifted our young people’s focus away from these types of jobs. In doing so, we now have a lack of qualified and motivated technical people. Many of the traditional people employed in trades and technical positions are aging out, and all companies are having a difficult time replacing them. Sadly, by portraying trade and technical positions as undesirable, we have created an army of young people with college debt and income potential less than if they had pursued more hands-on careers.”

Wagg notes that with the variety of jobs available in today’s laundries, operators

need to redouble their outreach to area educational institutions. “Our industry is unique,” he says. “There are so many different jobs in our companies that an apprenticeship program has proven to be a great source of future employees.”

MORE JOBS THAN CANDIDATES

The mixed experience of apprentice programs described above raises the question of why laundry maintenance jobs aren’t as appealing to candidates as one might expect. This limited interest could reflect a lack of awareness of what a commercial launderer like Unitex does, as opposed to retail dry cleaners or coin-op laundries.

Jewison says TCS’s apprenticeship program helps heighten awareness by familiarizing prospects with the day-to-day life of working in a laundry. Operators need to emphasize to candidates the advantages of working in a commercial laundry job—notably the stability and long-term growth opportunities that they provide, as opposed to similar jobs in higher-profile industries such as construction or auto manufacturing. “When you look at how our economy expands and contracts, maybe you can make more money with an automotive manufacturer or supplier,” Jewison says. “But in the case of right now, where maybe economically things are slowing down...They have layoffs, right? Whereas our businesses are somewhat recession-proof. I think slow and steady wins the race for our industry.”

For Curiale, the broader recruiting challenge isn’t for laundries alone, but also for similar goods-producing industries, such as food processors and manufacturers. Society has devalued these jobs in favor of tech-centered positions associated with computer programming and other primarily desk-bound work. “I think in today’s world, ‘tech-savvy’ has become synonymous with ‘computer-savvy’...not necessarily savvy in troubleshooting


and repairing highly technical equipment,” he says. “Our competition for technical employees has always been ‘parallel’ industries to ours. Businesses that actually ‘make’ something, using highly technical equipment.” Examples include food processing, warehousing, etc. “The macro problem is that people are just not interested in hands-on technical positions in in general anymore—there are more open positions than candidates.”

EXTERNAL/INTERNAL OUTREACH

Given today’s societal trends, locating and retaining quality maintenance teams isn’t likely to get any easier. Happily, there are creative tactics that companies can pursue to reach prospects, such as via social media websites, where they spend time. “Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn are all awesome channels to promote our industry,” Wagg says.

Operators can recruit technical staff internally as well by making these jobs as attractive as possible to team members. Start by making sure you have a good handle on the basics, says Jewison. “Take care of what you have,” he says. “If it needs paint, paint it. If the sheet rock’s broken, fix it. Just make whatever you have beautiful and make it work. Fix it and you will have a dynamic change in the environment.”

Bottom line? Your business success hinges to a large degree on the quality of your maintenance program. Without it, you risk quality and reliability problems related to “band-aid” fixes of machinery. “Why spend all this money on maintenance?” Jewison asks rhetorically. “Because maintenance is going to carry us into the future. It’s the heart of our business.” **TS**

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