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People & Plants:

Synchronized for Success

Laundry operators boost staff engagement and upgrade technology to stay competitive

By Jack Morgan

It's a truism of textile services that growth hinges on an operator's ability to mobilize and deploy an outstanding team, both in the plant and on the route. But to succeed in today's hotly contested markets, winning teams also need top-flight equipment/systems to meet customer expectations. Today's challenge is to merge these mutually exclusive goals into an effective force for growing your business.

Tech & Training

For Christopher Stammer, CEO of Voluminant, a business productivity and management-performance improvement company, that requires an approach centered on training employees. Success hinges on how well companies prepare staff to operate new systems in a plant. That, in turn, requires both management training and guidance. "Investing in new equipment can have a significant positive impact on staff engagement and morale," Stammer says. "But how the integration of new equipment goes is just as important." Stammer notes that his company has partnered with **TRSA** on dozens of training initiatives, including the LevelUp Supervisory Skills Training program. Generally, he says employees respond positively to plant upgrades because, "When employees see that leadership is committed to upgrading machinery, it signals that the company values efficiency, safety

and making their jobs easier. Equipment that reduces physical strains and repetitive tasks, or improves workflow, enables employees to focus on higher-value tasks, thereby boosting job satisfaction. But the implementation is critical: if employees aren't trained effectively, it leads to frustration. That's why training and communication are just as important as the investment itself."

Donald Maida, a consultant with Tingle, says the positive impact of adding automated systems can dissipate quickly if employees aren't well trained. "It is essential for operators to be properly trained on how to use the new equipment as soon as possible," he says. "An operator SOP (standard operating procedure) should be put together as soon as possible, including video instruction if possible. This will not only help in maximizing proper utilization but also help deter the risk of damaging new equipment from improper use. I have seen enthusiasm turn to abject frustration because training was poorly implemented. 'Work the bugs out' is not a plan."

Rich Kramer, president of City Uniforms & Linen, Findlay, OH, says technology is a win-win because it benefits employees, as well as managers and customers. "I would say, with respect to people, what it's done is it's provided more opportunity, so we can hire more people." He adds that with the use of RFID tags and tracking technology provided by Gurtler, Kannegiesser ETECH, Positek and others, it's easier to measure operator performance. "It gives us a lot of visibility, not only on how we're doing for the customer, but what the employees are actually doing because we can see their activity." Having "instant feedback" on employee performance lets companies focus training resources on those who need it most.

Kramer says his industrial laundry in central Ohio has taken advantage of training for technology and/or

management initiatives provided by both vendors and **TRSA**. He also taps employees that gain expertise in a given area to train others. "We have, I would say, people that are pretty well versed," he says. "We can kind of self-train through that." One example is an RFID-enabled dispenser for medical scrubs in hospitals. City Uniforms, a mixed operator with industrial and healthcare accounts, is sending staff to Italy this summer for additional training on the scrub dispenser (see related story, pg. 18).

Another operator, Ernest Addington, COO, Halifax Linen Service Inc., Roanoke Rapids, NC, says his company's training programs consistently generate positive results, particularly when the Halifax Linen has acquired new equipment. "Training on new machinery or systems is essential because it can significantly affect productivity, safety and employee

morale," Addington says. "An effective training approach should consider various factors: hands-on training, that is providing employees with experience with the equipment in a controlled, supportive environment, to ensure they become comfortable using it. Involving experts and providing ongoing support are key." That group of experts includes vendors, says Addington. Most vendors are responsive to laundries seeking training resources. "Many vendors offer training specifically to their equipment or systems, ensuring that staff understand the technical aspects and can operate the machinery efficiently," he says. "This can help reduce downtime and improve employee confidence."

Stammer notes that outside training organizations, such as **TRSA** also have an important role to play in ensuring that companies and their employees get the maximum value

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out of equipment and software resources. "Vendor training is valuable for the technical aspects, but outside programs—like those offered by **TRSA**—help supervisors connect the dots between equipment, efficiency and team leadership," he says. "Many companies make the mistake of assuming that training should only be about machine operation. In reality, the best-performing plants have supervisors who help lead teams through the change and ensure that new technology is adopted smoothly." However, change also brings challenges, Stammer says. Programs like LevelUp help supervisors develop the interpersonal and

analytical skills they need to ensure that staff know how to use new equipment, understand its benefits and operate it safely.

Maida cautions that in addition to training, operators should leverage their contacts with vendor or laundry industry colleagues who are operating similar systems. This can allow them to observe the equipment in a live setting and review the pros and cons of the vendor's offering on a real-time basis. "Before a company makes a significant equipment/system purchase, they should go to see that equipment/system in operation in a non-competitive

visit," he says. "These trips often can be set up by the vendor. When operators talk to operators about the equipment, you can determine if the considered new purchase is the right fit for their organizations. The cost of the trip can be money well spent, even if you discover that the new equipment application isn't quite the right fit."

In addition, Maida recommends that operators request that a vendor technician come on site to provide training on the equipment/system that the operator has acquired. "I would arrange for a technician to be on site for training on the equipment/system you purchase and install," he says. "I would also consider having a vendor technician revisit your operation at the one year or an earlier mark to address any problems, or at least fine-tune the equipment on bigger systems."

Networking with other operators with similar systems is another way to gain insights on a given piece of machinery and how to maximize its value to your operation. "I would also reach out to **TRSA** members, or other organizations for practical input on "best practices" concerning the new equipment," he says.

Upgrades' Staff Impact

Another factor to consider when deciding how and when to upgrade systems is to gauge the likely impact such a move could have on staff. This includes both veterans and recent hires, as well as those you're targeting for recruitment.

The consensus among the sources we contacted is that—provided training is given and the systems work as expected—the net impact on staff morale and recruitment/retention is positive. Stammer says people are drawn to organizations that are moving forward and fostering growth opportunities. "Yes, plant upgrades can be a major factor in retention, especially when they

'Shadow' Your Way to an Enhanced Tech Team

Rich Kramer, president of City Uniforms and Linen, Findlay, OH, says he uses "shadowing" to help new employees get comfortable with technology. He does this by pairing them with senior people to learn a range of tasks. For example, City Uniforms has a growing number of outpatient medical clients. Many have contracted for a scrub-dispensing machine that City provides through an Italian vendor. The machine uses radio frequency identification (RFID) tags and a "smart card" system to enhance security and cut losses. The RFID system tightens access so that medical professionals can only obtain the scrubs they're assigned by hospital management. The system can do this because, in essence, the RFID technology "knows" which tagged items that medical professionals have received. They can't get more until they turn in the ones they were initially issued.

Kramer says this system is more secure than rival dispensers that rely on video cameras. Without RFID tags, these machines are vulnerable to deception if an employee drops in non-scrub items, or other employees' scrubs to the machine's soiled bin. City Uniforms employees who are new to servicing the scrub machines receive on-the-job training from Cameron, a manager who oversees the program for City. He helps trainees get acquainted with the technology. "It's a lot of 'shadow work,'" Kramer says of getting newly assigned staff up to speed on the equipment. "So they'll be working alongside someone's job for a while," he says. "They'll be working with their manager, Cameron. He's responsible for it."

Cameron is one of three City employees that the company is sending to Italy this summer for additional training with the scrub machine vendor, Kramer says.

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directly improve working conditions," he says. "One of the biggest things I hear from trainees in LevelUp is their frustration with recurring issues where maintenance is always in 'fix it' mode. Maintenance engineers also hate it when they are constantly fixing aged-out equipment that wasn't maintained by the guy that was there before them. Investments in improving the plant makes employees more likely to stay. And you know what? Some of the most significant plant upgrades incur little to no capital expense. The LevelUp BOOST project that trainees complete at the end of the class proves that! That's why we teach supervisors in LevelUp to identify and track issues and work with the entire plant team to collaborate on implementing a solution or improvement."

Addington says his team makes it clear to candidates and new hires how important tech innovations are to Halifax. HR managers and other leaders tout the fact to prospects that they can join a company that stands on the forefront of tech advances in the linen uniform and facility services industry. "We share what makes us different from our competition and our future technology plans during onboarding," Addington says. "It can help our employees feel connected to the company's long-term goals, creating a sense of purpose and engagement."

Companies that eschew tech training, or worse, don't maintain the systems that they already have could find themselves in a difficult place on the personnel front. Stammer relates a personal experience in a job that nearly turned him off

from the linen, uniform and facility services industry. "The first plant I worked in was like out of a horror movie," he says. "It was dark and was made complete with the sound dripping water. If I was a worker who needed to go there every day, I might have lasted a day. On the flipside, look at the Crown plant in Atlanta or Roscoe in Chicago—they could serve lunch on the floors. That's where people want to work!"

But image alone isn't enough, he adds. As Addington noted, the management team needs to talk up its commitment to technology and share their vision with new hires. Stammer offers his take on that idea, noting that, "For this to work, it can't just be about the environment—you have to make the benefits clear to workers. New hires need to hear that the company is investing in tools to make their work environment safer, easier and more rewarding. When supervisors and HR make this connection, it boosts engagement from day one."

Manage Systems, Morale

The challenge for launderers is to maximize the positive impact on staff of equipment purchases, while at the same time optimizing efficiency, quality and throughput

For Maida, it comes to down three points: reducing ergonomic strain, increasing throughput and enhancing quality control. "Ergonomic improvements have an immediate impact on employee engagement," he says. "Reducing lifting, straining and fatigue should be at the forefront when considering improvements."


Next, add a system that enhances throughput by "getting faster to get better." Third, he says operators should seek out technology that enables them to exert more effective quality control. Sheet scanners that detect and reject stained or torn flatwork potentially could advance all three objectives.

Addington emphasizes the benefits of reducing manual handling of textiles—not only to reduce strains, but to open new opportunities for plant staff to engage in tasks that they may find are more satisfying. "Equipment innovations that automate repetitive or time-consuming tasks can free up employees' time, allowing them to focus on more meaningful or creative aspects of their work," he says. "This can give employees a greater sense of accomplishment, ultimately boosting engagement."

But Stammer adds that management must ensure that staff know how to use new tools safely and effectively. "By far, the most powerful engagement tool isn't the technology itself—it's how plant management and supervisors implement and communicate the benefits of these innovations," he says.

For savvy operators, training initiatives can create a virtuous circle of lower turnover, improved job satisfaction and employees who are qualified to use today's high-tech systems. Moreover, by training staff on technology, you can fuel their interest in learning more as additional innovations come online.

In other words, by investing in technology—while at the same time training your people—operators can synchronize their staff and plant processes for long-term growth. **TS**

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