

Issue Update

Q&A with Joe Ricci—‘Advancing a Vibrant and Resilient Industry’

TRSA’s president and CEO weighs in on key topics and their likely impact on companies and the industry at large

The linen, uniform and facility services industry is evolving quickly, with workforce pressures, new technologies and regulatory changes reshaping how operators plan.

We asked TRSA President and CEO Joseph Ricci to outline the challenges and opportunities he’s hearing about most—from automation and labor shortages to consolidation and policy priorities.

Drawing from discussions with members and industry leaders and a recently completed industry research and a new report based on one-on-one discussions between dozens of senior leaders, Ricci shares exclusively with *Textile Services* magazine fresh insights that will be explored in greater depth at the *TRSA Annual Conference & CEO Summit* this May. Until then, here is our conversation with Joe Ricci.

What are some of the issues member companies face today that they may not have raised in the past?

We recently hosted a series of discussions between more than three dozen CEOs and senior executives to gather their thoughts about the future of our industry. The more than 60 one-on-one discussions have been consolidated into a report using AI and the results were very enlightening.

For example, two years ago, many conversations centered on whether to invest in new technology. Today, operators are being much more candid about the reality that adopting new technology is harder than the investment decision itself. Leaders talk about the complexity of integrating systems across plants and operations and preparing their workforce for new tools.

The focus has shifted from aspiration to execution—what it really takes to make automation, AI, and data-driven systems work every day. Return on investment is also a more immediate concern. Operators want to know whether technology investments will truly deliver better services and customer experiences—not just empty promises.

At the same time, operators are being more honest about labor challenges, especially skills gaps. Higher wages have helped but not solved persistent shortages. There’s growing recognition that technology depends on people—automation can reduce labor pressure, but only if employees are properly trained and systems are maintained by skilled technicians and maintenance staff.

These were just some of the key findings from our recent discussions with industry leaders, and we intend to explore them further at our Annual Conference & CEO Summit.

What are some challenges that are more unique to smaller and midsize operators?

Small and midsize operators tend to feel labor and technology pressures more acutely. Labor shortages and wage inflation make automation important. But smaller firms often lack the capital and infrastructure needed to adopt new technology at the same pace as larger competitors.

Scale advantages are also becoming more evident. Consolidation among operators and customers favors larger firms that can spread costs across more volume, invest earlier in new systems and compete for larger contracts. Rising equipment prices, facility costs, financing expenses and regulatory compliance demands tend to hit smaller teams harder.

That said, smaller operators are among the scrappiest in the business, and they can still compete effectively when agility, quality and strong customer relationships matter.

When you look ahead a few years, what technology gaps do you see emerging if operators fail to keep up?

Wash-aisle automation and soil-sort automation are two examples of technological improvements that are already delivering strong value across the industry. Operators who delay investing in tunnel washers, integrated systems and automated soil sorting risk being locked into higher labor costs, lower throughput and capacity constraints that their competitors have already addressed.

Material handling paired with RFID and production visibility is another area where the baseline is shifting. Overhead movement systems—rails, monorails and conveyors—combined with tracking software—are no longer “advanced” solutions; they’re becoming standard. Those who remain cart-based and data-blind will struggle with efficiency, safety and service quality.

Similarly, technologies that help optimize water, heat and energy consumption are now proven tools. The real regret won’t be missing the latest innovation—it will be paying higher utility costs when these common-sense upgrades would have delivered savings.

Where will TRSA direct its time and resources in 2026?

Advocacy remains a top priority with a focus on protecting and advancing a vibrant and resilient industry. For example, we’re advocating for policies that encourage greater adoption of hygienically clean reusable healthcare textiles, including efforts in key states and with federal lawmakers in Congress and the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

We’re actively engaged on tax and regulatory issues across multiple states, with recent wins and ongoing efforts aimed at reducing costs and improving regulatory certainty for operators. In addition, we’re addressing emerging PFAS-related regulations and developing new tools and guidance to help members navigate these new requirements.

Finally, providing strong certification and education programs remain important goals. We continue to grow our Hygienically Clean certification program, and we’re in the process of updating our Clean Green standards. Based on member feedback, we intend to provide flexible, practical and value-driven education—particularly regional programs focused on workforce development, automation and operational efficiency.

What role should suppliers play to help strengthen the industry overall?

The most effective way supplier partners can support the industry is by being actively engaged with TRSA and its members. That means participating in committees and task forces, showing up at events, both virtual, such as Connections, and in-person, like our Annual Conference & CEO Summit and Healthcare Conference, as well as our new regional programs and other events. These events create opportunities to share expertise, understand operator challenges and contribute to meaningful dialogue around compliance, technology and best practices.

Read *Textile Services* magazine and newsletters for the latest trends, best practices and industry news and listen to TRSA’s Podcasts.

Investing in the industry through sponsorships and advertising helps support our education and advocacy efforts that benefit everyone. When vendors position themselves as subject-matter experts and view themselves as long-term partners in workforce development, compliance and operational improvement—not just as solution providers—the entire industry is stronger.

Which trends will have the greatest impact on the industry in the coming years?

Workforce capability will be one of the most decisive factors shaping the industry’s future. The biggest constraint isn’t simply labor availability, but rather having the technical and leadership skills required to operate increasingly automated, data-driven businesses. New technologies and how they are implemented across the industry will separate the leaders from the rest of the pack.

Consolidation will also continue to reshape the industry’s competitive landscape. Scale will continue to matter, but it will also push smaller and midsize operators to differentiate through specialization, service quality and by offering a

more personal customer experience. At the same time, customers want better data, transparency and responsiveness, which will force operators to rethink systems, service models and employee training.

Finally, culture, ethics and sustainability will remain strategic priorities. Trust, values and environmental stewardship will influence customer decisions, workforce development and long-term resilience.