

The Number One Problem Facing Surface Finishers Today

Finding trainable, eager workers has risen to the top of finishing shop owners' worries.

The absolute best part of my job is spending time around paint, powder, e-coat and plating facilities and leaders. Custom coaters, OEMs, job shops... you name it, I love it. One of my favorite questions to pose to the leaders of these facilities during my visits is: "What's your biggest challenge right now?"

For more than a year now I get the same answer almost every time. The number one problem facing surface finishers today is ... finding qualified employees.

On its face, this almost defies belief, and had I not heard the same answer from so many coaters and experienced the problem in my own business, I would have a hard time accepting it myself.

As of the date I author this article, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics places the official unemployment rate at 9 percent. According to Gallup, the underemployment rate—which takes into account those wishing to work additional hours, an additional job or a new job with longer working hours—hovers just above 18 percent.

With nearly one in five American workers either un-

employed or underemployed it seems inconceivable that coaters and manufacturers alike would have such a difficult time finding the right people. Mention this problem to a friend working outside the manufacturing sector and your statement produces a confounded gape. Raise the issue with a coater and watch for the knowing acknowledgement. What's the problem? There are three, actually.

Some Employee Candidates. A job opportunity is something you earn and work to keep. Nobody owes you a job and you are not, simply by virtue of your existence, entitled to one. Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Main Street, Occupy Sesame Street if you want to; unless you are willing to show up (every workday, not just when you feel like it) with your work ethic intact and your entitlement attitude checked at the workplace door then—to paraphrase Seinfeld's Soup Nazi—"No job for you!"

Some Employers. Wouldn't it be great if you could just snap your fingers and a fully qualified, trained and skilled operator or line worker would appear, willing to work as hard as you wanted them to for whatever you were willing to pay? Welcome to the real world. Skilled employees don't just fall from the sky. Developing them takes

time, requires a genuine interest in their wellbeing, their training, their progress and their future, not to mention a willingness to pay them a market wage for the skills and experience you need. Employers who seek the benefit of talented long-term team members must be willing to pay the price—in patience, interest and market wages.

Our Government. About a year ago our company made an offer to a skilled semi-truck driver candidate. In many ways, the position is ideal for a professional driver—enabling him to be home nightly, operate a modern rig and be compensated at an attractive market rate. The candidate responded that he had an interest in the position and thought it could be a good fit for him—then shocked us by declining. He went on to explain that his wife had a good job and health insurance and, given his remaining year of unemployment benefits, he wasn't quite ready to reenter the workforce.

As I write this, Congress continues debate over whether to

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extend unemployment benefits for yet another 12 months to individuals whose benefits are set to expire. Manufacturers complain of a lack of workers while Washington deludes itself into thinking that paying potential employees to stay home is compassionate, effective public policy. If job candidates, employers and the U.S. Government would screw their heads on straight we could fix "The Number One Problem Facing Surface Finishers Today." Quickly. ■

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