

WELDING *Journal*

Quality vs. Quantity: How to Train and Retain the Welding Industry's Best

These tips can help employers find and keep new and experienced welding operators

BY ROBERT TESSIER

It's no secret the welding industry continues to face a shortage of skilled labor year after year. In fact, the American Welding Society (AWS) estimates there will be a shortage of almost 400,000 welding operators in the industry by 2024.

With many welders reaching retirement age, seasoned veterans are not quitting nor moving to another field — they are simply aging out of the workforce. Meanwhile, there isn't enough new talent available to replace them.

At the same time, our industry's rapid technological advances require constant training and education for current employees.

How can companies find and keep experienced and well-trained welding technicians? It takes a balance between hiring someone new, who seems to have enough experience on paper, and finding someone to invest in long term. Here are a few key tips that employers can use to attract and retain talent.

Stop Searching for Superman

Have you ever read a job description searching for a multitasking candidate encompassing superhuman strength, speed, and senses? Although hiring Superman would be nice, more often than not, he or she doesn't exist. Meanwhile, there are new hires with job titles that don't reflect the work they can do or need to do every day.

The hiring process can be fraught with challenges, so employers should strive to hire the strongest candidate for the position instead of simply checking off a box to fill a spot on the team. The right candidates don't always have to be turnkey hires, especially if they are open to being trained for the position or come with certain skills.

If you hire someone who needs to be trained, try to expose them to different types of training and specialties. Provide this exposure early and on the front end of new hire training. A specific job might not be the right fit, but early exposure to other areas within the company could identify an alternate path while filling another vacancy. This could potentially funnel a new hire into an area where they will find their niche and become an efficient and hardworking employee for the company.

Take the time and energy to provide opportunities to new hires and save yourself from going back to



Fig. 1 — Provide employees with the tools they need to keep up in the industry and learn a skill set they might not have been able to obtain in school or at a previous job.



Fig. 2 — Build a balanced team. Spend time cross-training employees who will be backing up key duties to avoid the possibility of slowing down production or daily tasks.

square one in a few weeks' or months' time if the hire doesn't work out.

Cultivate a Strong Environment to Inspire

There are also candidates who have been in the field for decades. They are not ready to retire, but they are looking for new opportunities.

There is a certain level of fear that can come with the thought of putting the time and effort into one person, or a team of people, to broaden their horizons within the welding industry. Employers may find themselves asking a valid question, "Is this a worthwhile investment?" The answer is yes. If a company invests in the success of a welding technician, that person will also likely invest in him or herself and more firmly commit to the employer because of the encouragement and support received in the workplace.

Companies that provide training and opportunities for top talent are

more competitive. Those that recognize the importance of retaining valuable welding technicians and keeping employees engaged spend less time re-filling open positions. Provide your employees with the tools they need to keep up in the industry and learn a skill set they might not have been able to obtain in school or at a previous job — Fig 1.

Remember, a good training program attracts even more potential new hires through word-of-mouth marketing and referrals. Current employees who are feeling inspired by their company and the investment they are making into their careers will tell their old classmates, colleagues, and friends about the great opportunity they have found, as well as encourage them to consider joining the team.

Attracting and retaining talented technicians who have a passion for the business means offering the opportunity to learn skills they have been interested in and helping them increase their market value in the welding industry.

Take stock with each employee annually, covering these three steps:

1. An employee and his or her manager decide together on a new skill the employer needs the individual to learn that year and plan for a week of study to learn that skill.

2. In the same discussion, find out what new skill or training the employee is interested in gaining and plan for ways to get that experience.

3. Mutually decide on something new the employee can learn that, when trained, will benefit both the company and the employee.

When all is said and done, people typically don't solely leave a company because of salary. They often leave when they don't see a future for themselves or advancement opportunities within the company. Give them hope, encouragement, and top-notch resources that will help them to grow and become a strong, skilled worker for you. It's one thing to offer someone a job, but helping them find a long-lasting career will make all the difference.

Trust in Teamwork

Look for balance on your team, and pair individual expertise and personality traits together to generate a powerful team. For example, someone with a strong welding education could work great on the same team as someone with military experience who thinks outside of the box and takes action to complete the tasks required.

Teamwork also comes into play when adding depth to your workforce bench. Cross-training is important for both a large company and a small business of ten people. Having a cross-trained team of employees is key in preparation for illnesses, vacations, or an employee leaving unexpectedly — Fig. 2.

Don't allow time to go by with a gaping hole in a team that no one can fill. Think ahead to avoid the possibility of slowing down production or daily tasks because the proper training precautions were not taken. Also, consider how more user-friendly welding equipment can help shorten the cross-training time required for those backing up key duties.

Offer an Objective Career Path

It's human nature to want to know where you're going and how you'll get there. Managers should start by laying out the steps — skills, certifications, and tests — each team member will need to accomplish to get to the next

level. If you offer an objective path, egos and perceived biases fall away, and everyone can focus on the requirements to get to the next level.

Without direction and opportunity, employees can lose interest and not see a future for themselves at the company. Once the rules of the game are laid out, employees can get to work and go as far as they're willing.

The first level can require a solid understanding of welding basics, similar to the core curriculum toward a bachelor's degree. New team members can stay in that entry-level role for a few years and get a solid understanding of the basics; however, let them know that they'll eventually have to earn the right to move up through additional training and education.

At the mid-level, keep welders learning more about major functions and empower them to pick up the certifications and skills that help your business stay poised for success. If they take a test to pass a class, make sure they're able to apply their new learning by retesting six months down the line.

If you want to be a specialist, be special. Technicians who have mastered the second level can keep going up if they want, deep-diving into specializations and mastering their craft.


For someone who joins your team with previous experience, start with pretests to see how they stack up compared to your career ladder. These tests help you both determine where to focus energy during the on-boarding phase, and help integrate the new

person into your team.

Creating a career roadmap comes with benefits: Each member of the team gets stronger over time, you can develop succession plans when people advance, and you get a great return on your investment. There's no downside. You'll be able to bring in great talent and keep people as they invest in themselves and your company.

Invest in Talent

The U.S. Department of Labor has projected a 5% growth in employment for welders between 2016 and 2026. To keep up with this projection, be on the lookout for ways to make your company more competitive and efficient, whether by using the latest technological advances in tools and machinery, or hiring the strongest welders.

In today's welding world, the dark cloud of workforce shortages seems to be heavy over the heads of employers, but it doesn't need to be. With both new and veteran welders looking for their next opportunity and learning experience, companies will benefit from drafting a solid recruitment plan and a solid employee retention plan. Invest in strong hires who are willing to return the favor and invest back in the company they work for. 

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