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Technical Management Part 3 – Retaining Technicians Through Training by Casey Carrigan, Vice President, Apex Technology (based on his BCMC 2002 presentation)

“...technicians must know and understand the theory behind what they are designing before putting that theory into practice. The place I suggest starting is building an in-house technical library. Encourage technicians to consult the reference materials in the library often and impress upon them through training that this is the most important component of their technical training at your company.”

I was motivated to create a training program for the technicians at Apex Technology because of my past experience. My first job out of Florida State University was for a large structural engineering company. Their training program went something like this: a self-instructed crash course in standard company design procedures while simultaneously juggling clients. I was forced into learning the hard way many times and by and large that was not the most effective way for me to have learned the ropes. When I met up with Barry Dixon at our first high school reunion, he proposed a project that I was crazy enough to take on: managing a start-up structural engineering firm that did design work for True House, Inc. Here I am three years later and have learned quite a deal about managing technicians and engineers. It was through this career change that I felt compelled to create a technician training program for new hires to follow during their first few months on the job.

Now that Apex has grown considerably over the last few years, we are bringing in all technicians on the front end of the design process: CAD technicians, structural engineers as well as support staff that have considerable knowledge of design or engineering principles. With our staff's collective design experience now spanning all ends of the spectrum, it has become more crucial than ever for us to establish training guidelines. We realize that this is both for the health and longevity of our employees as well as our company.

PART 1: CAREER TRAINING & RECRUITING

Career training is largely overlooked by most companies, most likely because they don't feel that this is a role the employer should undertake. We at Apex believe the opposite is true. Actively engaging in the career training of your employees will work for the benefit of the company as well as for your employees' career. We feel that career training is very important to the success of the company as a whole. This means being in touch with the skill sets required for each job and having one-on-one evaluations with employees to determine if they are completely satisfied with the job and their ability to fulfill the required skill set. You may find that there is a better fit for someone in another position or even in another line of work.

Another aspect of career training has to do with the culture of your business. When you bring new hires into your professional atmosphere, you probably expect compliance from your current employees. The current employees should read “the reading list” at the earliest opportunity to understand how to welcome and treat new hires. The reading list that I suggest includes: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *University of Success*.

First impressions mean everything; make sure your staff realizes your expectations and why you have them. This also raises the topic of setting the example of a positive working atmosphere. The old adage “practicing what you preach” is key here. You cannot achieve this type of work environment by walking through the office and demanding that everyone keep a positive attitude. You have to absolutely practice what you preach in order to set this example.

Another tool we use for introducing new hires into our atmosphere is the Franklin-Covey time management model. We send employees to these seminars that focus on effective time management tactics that are great for introducing your expectations of the new hire. Along those lines, we don’t plan on our new hires to be at our disposal and ready to tackle a full workload for at least thirty days.

PART 2: TECHNICAL TRAINING

The basis behind our technician or engineer training is this: theory before practice always. That is, technicians must know and understand the theory behind what they are designing before putting that theory into practice. The place I suggest starting is building an in-house technical library. Encourage technicians to consult the reference materials in the library often and impress upon them through training that this is the most important component of their technical training at your company. Refer to the list above for my recommended reference titles.

GET BUDDY-BUDDY

We set up a mentor for each new hire to serve as a resource for them to consult with any questions or problems during their first few months on the job. The mentor could even be someone in a different department than the new hire.

OTHER INDUSTRY TRAINING PROGRAMS

We also include other industry training programs into our technician training program. These can really enrich the program and round-out the content nicely so that you are sure to cover all the necessary bases before the new hire jumps in.

- [WTCA's Truss Technician Training & Truss Knowledge Online](#)
- WTCA Engineering & Technology Committee Meetings
- Building Component Manufacturers Conference (BCMC)
- SBCCI (Now ICC)
- Plate suppliers—a great resource for learning about software issues.
- Hardware Manufacturers

- I-Joist Manufacturers
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