

Capitalize on a New Talent Pipeline in 2015

Brian Regan

President

Semper International, LLC

bregan@semperllc.com

In the dawn of 2015 the skilled labor landscape is looking more and more like a scene from *The Disappeared*. Everyone, from trade organizations to *Forbes* magazine is decrying the lack of skilled tradesmen.

The lack of skilled talent in printing isn't a new challenge. The dawn of digital ten years ago caused a snowball effect throughout the industry, with declining demand and a change in the respect accorded to traditional print roles triggering a talent flight from our ranks—one that has, in fact, outpaced the industry contraction. Still, we expect this talent shortage to come to a head this year because demand has (finally) changed. As orders are starting to come in again, many printers are understandably frustrated to discover they don't have the bodies to do the work at the price points they have become accustomed to.

As our talent pool dries up, we need to find a new pool. At Semper, one pathway starting to gain traction is to look for people with transferable skills. The idea is to find talent from similar or adjacent industries with comprable equipment (think biotech or mechanical engineering) and incent them to come over to the print universe. In this crunch to move our industry from where we have been to where we will be tomorrow, a transferable talent pool may be the critical bridge the industry needs.

Where Did the Labor Problem Come From?

We know that printing today is an industry in transition. But that transformation is not happening as fast as we are losing existing talent. This year, four trends are all combining to spell a major resource problem: A changing industry; training programs that are drying up; fewer apprentices; and an economic environment that spent the past several years decimating the existing skilled labor force. Here's the breakdown...

As printing firms automate and move to digital, the number of total jobs has faced a steep decline—to the tune of 5% per year for the foreseeable future according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There just won't be the same numbers and demand for heavy print machinery operators in the future as there was ten years ago, and print companies—the ones who will survive—are responding to this challenge by moving into new arenas, such as digital, graphic design, and 3D printing.

Looking at this data, trade schools and post-secondary schools stopped funding core print courses. They make money by student attendance, and

MORE INFORMATION



Forbes: America's Skilled Trades Dilemma

<http://prnt.in/4oA>



Pew Research: Baby Boomers Retire

<http://prnt.in/4od>



BLS: Printing Workers Occupational Outlook

<http://prnt.in/4oP>

with shrinking demand, there is little incentive for schools to develop aggressive curricula. The net result is less new skilled talent coming into the marketplace. While more trade schools close or eliminate courses, the bulk of our existing skilled labor force is slated for retirement. Beginning in 2011, Baby Boomers began retiring at a rate of 10,000-a-day, drying up a good bulk of the trade labor pool.

Apprenticeship programs have also declined steeply. Companies have limited training budgets and are increasingly demanding people who already possess the needed skills. This adds pressure to managers tasked with ensuring quality while being required to do so with too few skilled workers. They have tried to solve the dearth by driving overtime hours or asking managers to work additional hours by themselves, but this can only be a temporary stopgap.

The recession only exacerbated this problem. It resulted in a hard stop on new hiring and drastic moves to reduce staff to keep companies afloat. This move was not unique to printing, but the impact was the same. Disenfranchised, many workers left the industry altogether. They became plumbers, electricians, painters, and other skilled technicians.

It's worth acknowledging that some of our talent shortages are coming as a result of pay scale discrepancies. As printing digitizes and we move into more competitive talent markets, we will face additional talent shortages unless we better align salaries to these new markets. You may need a solid IT team, but if you aren't able to compete with Google's salaries, you may find yourself staffed by second-tier developers.

All of this adds up to our current situation. We have a significant talent shortage. To survive, we need to rethink what we can do to bring people into the industry. One solution is finding a new pool of mechanically inclined talent.

Transferable Skills:

What Are They, and Why Do They Matter?

When we talk about transferable skills, we are talking about people with aptitude and knowledge developed for one area which can be transferred to another. For example, a repair technician who repairs locomotives

would have a baseline of skills that include seeing how mechanized systems work together, the ability to work with tools and electricity, and the ability to evaluate and repair motorized equipment. While he currently uses these skills on locomotive engines, his skillset would effectively transfer into the maintenance and use of other mechanized systems.

Employees with transferable skills make a particularly effective Band-Aid for our current talent shortage because they would create faster ramp-up times. Rather than training new apprentices from scratch, we can pinpoint the key elements printers must possess, and leverage people with existing strengths in those areas. The ramp-up time for those individuals will be dramatically faster than someone starting from scratch. Clearly, they will need to understand some new specific processes and machinery, but they already have the existing ingredients to succeed.

Keep in mind that to convince skilled talent to consider your organization, you will likely need to offer higher wages than you would to non-skilled staff or other entry-level positions.

Skills that Will Transfer to Printing

The transferable skill idea isn't brain surgery, but a logical solution to an existing need. The best chance the print industry has to survive is to find the closest available talent and give them some quick training to fill in a few knowledge gaps.

But where do you look for this skilled talent holy grail? Because we see machine operators and technicians as the most immediate need, let's talk about where to find them. To be successful, a good print tradesman needs several specific skills. Look for people with the ability to:

- Pay attention to details, particularly visual details
- Work quickly under pressure
- Deliver on tight timelines
- Multitask
- Show up for their shifts reliably and consistently
- Execute repeatable processes
- Repair machinery
- Manage for quality
- Basic computer and math skills
- Some digital inclination or the ability to deal with press files

Your unique company may also require some specific hard skills, including some kind of mechanical competence, a basic understanding of electricity, order batching, or how to color match a proof. You may also look for softer skills such as organization, the ability to train or coach a team, customer focus, or a history of leading a small team.

By demystifying the skills successful printers need, we can then explore the places this kind of talent is likely found.

Where Can We Find These Transfers?

Looking for transferable talent isn't like looking for a unicorn or taking out a missing persons ad. The core competences most skilled print talent need can, in fact, be found in a variety of industries.

Particularly on the trade front, transferable skills are much more tactile. If someone understands how to manipulate something in the physical world, he or she can often easily transfer that thought process from one machine to another.

Think about any other industry floors you have walked. Anywhere that has similar equipment would be a good source of transferable talent. Here's my short list of target-rich environments:

- Manufacturing
- Auto plants
- Energy companies
- Aerospace
- Medical and plastic machine workers
- Medical devices or medical imaging (prepress)

Printing isn't the only industry that has faced hard times over the past several years. A variety of trade and manufacturing companies are also contracting. In your local market, profile other industries or organizations in the midst of layoffs—are there any key mechanical staff or other talent that you can reach out to?

With some smart recruiting and a coherent plan, you can effectively recruit from other industries and find the talent you need to keep the machines running!

Approaching Transferable Talent

Hopefully you're convinced that transferable talent is the solution to some of your major staffing needs, and we've given you some ideas of where to look. Now we have to get that team in the door.

Step 1: Assess Your Company's Readiness for Transfers

There's no one right way to bring new talent onto your floor. Every company is different, so you need to think about how someone with a transferable skillset will fit into your unique company culture. Consider:

1. When looking for particular transferable skills, first take a thorough look at your organization. Ask yourself what skills your team needs that might be transferable and list examples such as machine operation and repair, understanding safety, or working in small teams on a common piece of equipment or unit.
2. Once you have augmented the sample list to meet your needs, look at which other industries have similar processes. Is that industry

expanding or contracting? Do they have sufficient schools training new workers? How healthy is the industry? This will help you hone your best recruiting sources.

3. Look at your local markets and identify which local industries match the above elements—especially ones that are contracting. Pay close attention to each industries' pay scales and seek alignment.
4. Consider your internal talent pool. Do you have the right people to train others? Mentoring, training, and coaching skills? Develop an incentive program so your staff is willing to train and be rewarded for it and/or look for other solutions to train your team, such as local associations or recently retired workers.

Step 2: Generate Excitement About the Move

Recruiting transferable talent requires a different approach than hiring someone just out of school. These individuals tend to be more mature, and have already built a career in a different industry. Your "sales pitch" needs to correspond to those more mature needs and incent someone who is mid-career into thinking about a change.

While we see a wealth of good potential print talent out there, we also know they are a little battle-weary watching the decline of their first chosen industry. A top transferable talent is unlikely to jump ship to another industry they believe is also sinking. To inspire a move, give your transfer prospect something to get excited about in the form of a specific job and/or career path.

To do that, you need to explain that—contrary to popular belief—the print industry isn't dying. To me, people coming into the industry have an opportunity to be involved in an amazing transformation. While new manufacturing jobs are contracting rapidly due to mechanization, the print industry is really evolving.

This means that a new pool of talent has the chance to help usher us into the future—to help us move from where we are today into the next phase of industry technology. Presses are becoming digital, and printers are learning new skills. We simply need to change the dialog away from "print is dying" to "we are all coming together—so c'mon over!"

Step 3: Offer a Coherent Training Plan

Along with a general energy around growth opportunities for printing, you want to lay out a career path for transfer talent. Paint a picture of the value they will realize from learning existing print processes, and also the skills they will develop for the long term. Such as training in digital presses and digital prepress. Many digital press operators came from press or prepress backgrounds.

If you talk to talent these days, it's clear that most know the world is changing around them. Mature employees today want to leverage their

existing skills, but also learn new ones to future-proof their career. To recruit them, be ready to show them that path in a very specific way.

If you want to recruit more mature talent, have the answers for these questions well prepared:

- Why do you need me?
- How will I use my current skills with your organization?
- When will the training process be complete?
- What will happen after I am trained?

As a company (or an industry), let's give our skilled tradespeople a vision. Tell your new recruits they have a future in this company, and offer a clear vision of how their skills fit in. Explain to them how the skillsets that we are training you on today will evolve over time.

Talk timelines—this is what we're doing; this is how long we're going to do it for; and this is the future of the organization. At the end of the day, people considering a career change are looking for more security. Make sure your transferable talent understand how their skills today have a specific contribution to the team and the bottom line. In addition, show them the new training you offer and what role they will play in the development of your company vision.

Looking Ahead

The print talent shortage is a long-term challenge. To solve these structural issues, we need to think about how to effectively incorporate new technology and training needs and excite an evolving workforce of digital natives into our community. In the short term, however, finding and recruiting people with transferable skills is a viable alternative to watching our presses lay empty. These new recruits may even come in with new, creative approaches to help lead this transition.

As printers, we are more than just the sum of our parts. As you think about how these recommendations' impact upon your individual companies, also pause to think about your role in the training and education of our broader community. Each of us is a key resource and can serve as a pipeline to bring new talent into our ranks. What other ideas can you offer to build the recruitment of transferable skills into our community? What impact could this kind of approach have on funding new training or apprentice opportunities?

The print industry has a rich history of solving difficult challenges and embracing change. Using those historically honed qualities to tackle our talent needs will create both short- and long-term programs that keep us working today, welcome new blood into our ranks, and launch us into exciting new future endeavors.