In this day of automation, we are seeing machines taking over many jobs in laundry facilities. Despite this advancement, there is still a human element present that cannot be ignored. Even with the most highly automated operation, without skilled and properly trained employees the benefits may not be as desired. The human role goes much farther than simply watching over the machines.

Nick Goebel, global director of Customer Training Services for Rockwell Automation, addresses this in his white paper entitled “Optimizing Your Most Critical Asset.” He contends that automated operations cannot be optimized without investing fully in the “people asset.” He contends that “many manufacturers neglect to consider the importance of having a highly trained workforce to operate and maintain that sophisticated technology,” which can actually result in increased expense and reduced productivity should the machines go down or encounter problems.1

It takes more than just teaching an employee to “push a button,” so to speak, at a certain time, in a certain way. The employee should fully understand why he must push that button, what the outcomes are, and what happens if he does not. In this way, he becomes more effective in that he becomes invested in the process. He can provide input about what is working and what is not. He becomes part of the improvement process rather than a faceless cog in the machine. While a machine can provide data about its own function parameters, it cannot use intuition or well-reasoned ideas to improve itself or the overall process. Unfortunately, many businesses that introduce automation believe that this alone will improve performance and productivity. However, the machinery is overseen and often maintained by employees. If these employees have not received adequate training, the benefits may not even be realized. This environment requires a “high degree of decision-making responsibility on the part of those who operate the system,” requiring an appropriately designed education system. 2

Applying this concept in terms of laundry, we know that those working the floor are responsible for sorting laundry correctly, making sure the machines are properly loaded, and observing whether the finished product is coming out as desired. This takes a keen eye and proper training. Without these skills in play, the machines will never improve the efficiency of the facility on their own. Spotting a problem is the first crucial step in staving off costly downtimes.

James Mangini, Linen Services Manager for Maine Medical Center says that when his plant was rebuilt to a fully automated operation, the equipment supplier sent in staff to train his workers. His entire maintenance staff, along with the lead supervisor, was brought in and the manufacturer did not sign off on the training until they were confident they were ready. The lead supervisor was then responsible for creating standard operating procedures for all the equipment, which would be used for ensuring ongoing training was correct. Mangini says this training was something that was built into the contract with the equipment supplier. Whether doing a complete retro-fit or only introducing one new piece of equipment, seeking out this type of training is something each facility should consider.

Goebel also points out that training improves employee morale and retention: “According to a 2003 study by the American Society for Training and Development, forty-one percent of employees at companies with poor training planned on leaving the organization within a year as opposed to the mere twelve percent found at companies with excellent training programs.” Losing and replacing employees can cost a company a significant amount of money, anywhere from fifty to one hundred fifty percent of the original employee’s salary due to costs of recruiting, hiring, and training the employee.1

Thus, we can see that the advent of automation does not negate the need for first-rate employee training. What are the critical elements that must be addressed when building a top-notch training program? LSA Global, a “full service business training, performance consulting, and outsourcing firm,” in their list of top ten best training practices, states that first and foremost the training program must dovetail with an organization’s overall strategic plan. This means, of course, that the organization must have a clearly defined strategic plan that is easily understood so that key elements can be identified when building a training program.

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program. This entails taking employee training beyond the level of simply teaching them the mechanics of how to do their job; it should include them in the global aspects of the company’s goals and visions for the future.3

The training program must also be tailored, not just to the automated environment, but to the employees that will be in charge of running it. Such factors as education levels and language must be taken into account. Goebel points to an article that states that a typical technician today “must read and understand 5,000 pages written at an undergraduate or higher level,” as opposed to 500 pages at an eighth grade level just ten years before, with an estimated seventy-five percent of the workforce needing to be retrained to keep up with the changing environment. While this might seem challenging, the payoff is worth it. “The United States Department of Labor estimates that raising the educational level of employees by one year results in eight to thirteen percent higher labor productivity.”1

Another factor to consider is employees whose primary language is not English. We see an increase of these employees comprising the workforce. In order to meet the training needs for this workforce efficiently, the training must take a different approach. Ideas or concepts that are taken for granted might not accurately translate into their language, or if they do speak English, even fluently, they may still not have a frame of reference that allows them to grasp what is being conveyed. Beyond the frustration this might cause in terms of work performance, this can also be a safety issue, especially where automation is concerned. It then becomes imperative that the training program goes beyond simply showing them what to do.

In the article “Make Safety a Universal Language,” Joey Lucia explains that some of the inherent challenges of working with non-English workers go beyond language; the cultural differences become a factor. He gives the example of migrant Hispanics who often have limited education, requiring that their training be at a level they can understand. In Texas alone, Hispanics represented thirty-three percent of the workforce, yet accounted for forty percent of workplace fatalities in 2005. Lucia suggests that the training should involve a lot of demonstration and hands-on sessions. Most importantly, these employees should not be released to their duties until they have demonstrated that they understood their training.4 Other cultures present their own challenges, for example those who do not accept female supervisory roles easily. All this must be taken into account when dealing with a diverse workforce.

This leads to another challenge: many non-English speakers may not ask questions, or may indicate that they understand when they do not, out of fear of embarrassment. Some may not report unsafe conditions out of fear for their jobs. Lucia suggests that the training be done by a training resource outside of the workplace, or at least by someone who will not be a direct supervisor over these employees, which will allow them to feel more open about asking questions or for clarifications.4 Some facilities have taken the extra step of hiring interpretive services, an investment that has proven invaluable in terms of safety, efficiency, and employee morale. Others have implemented picture boards that spell out job duties, as well as do’s and don’ts, that uses universal images which are understandable to anyone regardless of language and culture.

GUIDELINES FOR CULTURAL ETTIQUETTE

• Make an effort to learn at least some basic words of the language(s) of your non-English speaking employees. Taking this step shows an interest in them and will foster loyalty.
• Do not expect employees of other cultures to completely conform to the expected way of doing things. Some cultural differences are rooted in religious beliefs. To try and force someone to go against that shows great disrespect. An example would be touching a woman of Muslim faith, even accidentally. This requires you to educate yourself in the cultures of the employees you are working with.
• Watch your gestures. Some gestures that are acceptable in one culture are extremely offensive in another. While it is impossible to know what will be offensive to someone else 100% of the time, if someone does voice a complaint, take it into consideration and refrain from using that gesture. Getting upset or implying that they shouldn’t take offense will only close down the doors of communication.
• Also, watch out for using slang. It may also be offensive, but more importantly, will often not be understood. Especially be cautious when using it during training; if the meaning is lost, the trainee will not grasp what he or she is being taught, which could lead to negative results, even safety issues.
• Along this line, remember that humor is very subjective. This could also be an area where you may offend those of other cultures. Again, here is where self-education and open communication is beneficial.
• The bottom line here is education, respect, and tolerance. Employees of all cultures should feel welcome and safe in their workplace. Ensuring they do will make for a highly efficient facility.
With non-English speaking or limited-education employees, buddy training in addition to formal, classroom style training may be advantageous. These trainees may be more open to asking questions in this type of mentor-trainee environment. It also allows the mentor to assess the trainee’s comprehension and give corrections that can be acted on right away. The mentor can watch the trainee actually performing the tasks, utilizing an assessment system such as a checklist, to decide if the trainee is performing adequately or is in need of further training before being allowed to work solo. Of course, in order for this to be effective, the buddy trainer must be someone who has been correctly trained himself so that bad habits are not passed on.

Another workforce segment to consider is the over seventy million baby boomers rapidly approaching retirement. Usually a well-educated segment, they still require continuing education to keep up with rapidly changing technology, as will the workforce that replaces them. While not all wash floor personnel will be responsible for overseeing the machines as much as working beside them, it is still essential that they understand to some extent how they work or what is expected of their performance. If a machine malfunctions, or results are not what they should be, those on the floor will be the first to notice, but only if they are properly trained to do so.

If your facility is struggling and you are not sure where to begin overhauling your training program, Goebel suggests hiring an outside party to do a skills assessment. The assessment can identify the skill set of your current workforce and compare it to the needs of their tasks. Identifying the gaps between the two is the first step in understanding what training is lacking so that your program can be improved.

The training itself should be done by someone who is not just knowledgeable, but also someone who can adjust the information to fit the needs of the participants. The vast amount of knowledge about the technical aspects of the equipment or processes might not necessarily be appropriate to every training session. To that end, someone who is easily drawn off-course will not only lose his audience, but will cost more in time and productivity.

Training itself is not a “one and done” process. It should be ongoing. Studies suggest that one year after a training session, trainees only retain an estimated ten to fifteen percent of what they learned. Combined with the fact that their work environment is constantly changing with increased technology or processes, it becomes essential that their training program keeps pace. Utilizing industry-specific educational resources and/or certification programs on an ongoing basis will help employees keep their training fresh in their mind while staying abreast of changes. Making sure your training program is adjusted to your exact needs will reduce down time, employee turnover, and safety issues. It will also foster employee loyalty when they feel that you are investing in them.

As we can see, automation brings many benefits to the laundry facility. However, the human factor is still the driving force behind the efficiency of the facility. As such, your employee will always be your most significant investment and should be treated as such. Having a properly trained workforce will ensure a productive and safe facility.

2. “Automation.”
5. McCullough, Jill. “Corporate Interest Grows in Training, Continuing Education.”