How well laundry employees do their jobs comes down to the right training at the right time. Successful operations know that training—from one-on-one instruction to web-based courses—develops competencies and cultivates worker satisfaction.

**On-Boarding**

Training must begin as soon as an employee comes on board. “Everything starts with employee orientation,” says Ed Frilling, director of distribution and customer relations for Central Ohio Medical Textiles (COMTEX).

Like many companies, COMTEX’s workforce is multilingual, so employees are encouraged to bring a trusted interpreter, or the company will either pull in a bilingual employee to help or use interpreter services. Training processes must take language into account and be tailored to meet the needs of all employees.

The company’s staff orientation begins with the basics, such as company policies and review of the company handbook, with a signed acknowledgement that training was provided. Next, a tour is provided to reinforce safety regulations and ensure all workers follow safety procedures.

New staff are placed in a specific department—soiled linen collection, sort, wash, or finishing—and trained at each station. When an employee is comfortable and competent at one job assignment, they are moved to a new position.

Breaking in new hires for front-line positions requires pairing with a lead worker from the department. “Depending on how well the worker grasps safety and quality, as well as gains efficiency of operating the machine, they may get moved to another machine. The amount of time involved in training a new associate varies. However, an individual that requires the most effort may become one of the strongest employees over a long period of time,” he adds.

**Pairing with Experience**

At United Hospital Services in Indiana, pairing new hires with a supervisor is part of the training process.

“For example, we’ll place two in soil sort, two in flatwork, two in dry fold, and one in the pack department,” says Jason Hartsell, director of operations.

The supervisor will demonstrate the quality standard for each item. “Some areas are more complicated,” says Hartsell, “when we send an employee to the pack room, the group leader over
that area will have to spend more time with the employee over the next month to two months.”

**Simplifying Training**

Training can be simplified when unnecessary complications are removed. By creating standard procedures that reduce the decisions made by workers, there are fewer opportunities for mistakes, according to George Latus, RLLD, manager of laundry services for White River Health System.

“For example, bags coming into the soil side of the facility are considered to be contaminated and workers wear the proper PPE,” says Latus. “As at other facilities, hand washing is a required and an automatic activity when moving from one area to another.”

Latus adds that each member rotates through the jobs. “Every team member has the capability of doing every job in the system, so I don’t have individuals who specialize on the sort room – they do a weekly rotation. They are exposed to every aspect of the laundry process, from the soil side to finishing to the delivery process we go through.”

**Capable Workers**

For training in any area to be effective, it must match the capabilities of the workers. At Robley Rex VA Medical Center, the laundry operation is staffed by a third-party provider whose mission is to offer employment to physically challenged individuals.

“They are trained according to their capacities,” says Harold Roy Campbell, chief of environmental management services. “We use a show and tell method of training our staff. We have pictures for those that may not comprehend as easily.”

The operation has an extensive set of standard operating procedures that covers everything from hazardous waste removal to personal protective equipment (PPE) to employee immunizations.

“Anytime an employee is on the floor, a supervisor must be present,” says Campbell. “The trainers and the supervisors are there and reinforce the same procedures over and over again.”

In the soil sort area, as carts come in and go for dumping, supervisors are nearby calling out directions to ensure procedures are being followed. Work performance is documented and that information can be used for retraining purposes, or for making the decision to move a worker to an area for which they are better suited.

**Training Effectiveness**

To evaluate the effectiveness of training, each operation must document how well workers are meeting set standards. At Sea Island Laundry in Brunswick, Georgia, the operation uses a production software management system that “helps track production, which helps us train,” says Kathy Harris, RLLD, CLLM, laundry manager.

“We know in what areas we need to better train employees based on production numbers.”

In the finishing area, workers are trained in the proper way to fold sheets, tablecloths, and similar items for the laundry’s 5-star resort customers. These standards are modeled on the Forbes Travel Guide Star Rating criteria for presentation and performance.

“Then management and the learning specialist sit down with the team member to take a look at how they performed and determine if more training is needed in any area,” says Harris. “If more training is needed, the employee is put back in the areas of need until the skills are mastered. If additional training is not needed, the employee is placed into daily rotation.”

Training takes up to 30 days before a worker is 100 percent fully trained to be a laundry attendant, according to Harris.

“During their first 90 days, and during their probationary period, we really try to rotate them through as many areas of the plant as possible,” says Hartsell. Workers go through different positions and their production rate is monitored at each position.

“We have good results with rotating,” says Hartsell. “However, you can overly rotate someone. If you rotate them too much trying to hit every position during that first 90 days, you may never find a position that is good for that employee.”

**Follow-Up Training**

Hartsell says the company is developing a program to focus on areas in which follow-up training is needed. Workers will be pulled off the floor in their first few weeks to spend 30 to 40 minutes in sessions covering various topics.

“In the past, we’ve done programs where we took the employees off the floor after initial operational training to cover our quality standards with them,” says Hartsell. “That process had good results for the employees during their first couple of weeks. It also gives new hires a chance to air any grievances – if they have been unhappy or a position is not working out. They can say, ‘soil sort is not for me, I’d like to try something else.’ We can then salvage rather than lose them.”

Training policies and procedures for United Hospital Services are built around the Healthcare Laundry Accreditation Council (HLAC). Requirements, such as hand washing, wearing PPE during soil sort, and other mandates, are incorporated into the company’s policies and training programs.

**Business Culture**

Training also becomes a means for creating a culture of excellence and high performance. “Managers, supervisors, and lead workers are challenged to maintain the desired culture,” says Frilling. “Reinforcing positive behaviors and conducting as-needed job coaching on a daily basis helps foster that culture. Position rates are designed to allow an operator to safely perform the assignment, inspect for quality, and meet 100 percent efficiency. It’s a red flag when an associate exceeds (production) rate by more than 15 percent.”

Employees exceeding production standards at high levels are thanked, but also reminded to balance safety, quality, production, and not focus only on their productivity, Frilling says.

Through an emphasis on training, successful laundries are building a competent and engaged workforce. Surveys — usually on an annual basis — coupled with evaluation and feedback shows employees value training and usually demand more.