

Coping With Staffing Shortages

Q. We are struggling with staff shortages that are leading to decreased throughput and an increase in rejects. Add to that, our technical support from our supplier has been reduced. Any suggestions to help in this situation?

A. Staffing is one of the top operational challenges plating shops, and businesses in general, are facing today. It is a troublesome reality that cascades into many other areas. The good news is there are factors you can address outside of staffing to help you gain some efficiency and do more with less during this time. It starts with a comprehensive operational and full plating line audit with the help of your chemical supplier.

Let's look at an example that demonstrates the difference a comprehensive plating line audit can make to the bottom line in terms of savings, quality and time, and then we can review some steps that can help provide a starting point for an internal operational audit to unlock more efficiency. In this example, a plating shop was running three acid zinc lines and noticed their costs were up significantly, they were experiencing rejects and overall frustrations were high. They needed to reduce costs and improve quality. A knowledgeable chemistry supplier performed a comprehensive line audit and review, and three key efficiency issues were uncovered: they were losing a lot of product over the sides of the tank with unnecessary adds, their product costs were higher than necessary, and there was a lack of technical training and support from their existing supplier. The following solutions were recommended: The implementation of auto-feeders to maintain proper additions; eliminate wasted product; and keep the bath in check. This solution provided immediate savings for the shop of 20% in chemistry usage by eliminating the margin for error and waste. It also saved time and substantially decreased rejects. Further, a cost evaluation on their cleaners resulted in a switch to a liquid format, which provided a better pricing opportunity, and auto-feeders were added for those as well, saving labor costs and extending the life of the cleaners. Finally, time was invested in training lab employees and providing technical education on the products to help the operators better understand how to maintain the baths and troubleshoot if needed. The final outcome of putting the proper controls in place and going the extra mile with training and support helped the shop decrease its costs by 20% and provided additional time and labor savings. They experienced a significant increase in efficiency as they were spending less and using less proprietary chemistry to produce the same amount of work. From an operational standpoint, this was a win/win.

The next step beyond scheduling a full line audit with your supplier is to do an operational audit on your shop to find areas where efficiencies can be gained. In today's workplace with more open jobs than applicants, time is

most definitely at a premium. As a result, it's easy for all of us to say we are too busy and don't have time for an audit, but the reality is (take an increase in rejects, for example), doing something the wrong way means having to do it again. So it's worth committing to do what is right, not just what is fastest and most convenient. Take the time to step back and look at your business through a different lens for a day to be clear on your most important objectives. Some shops will gather their team and assign a manager to each of these audit steps. It can be helpful to assign someone to a step that falls outside of their normal work area to better ensure they will pay close attention to detail and look at things differently.

- **Evaluate your process from start to finish.** This may sound tedious, but there is a lot to be gained by stepping back with a fresh perspective and evaluating your operational process to identify bottlenecks, redundancies, and areas to improve upon. Look for areas in your process that add unnecessary steps, cost or time. Simplifying a workflow can enhance productivity. Be sure to clarify and update your process documentation and develop an easy-to-reference checklist for employees and managers.
- **Employee Training.** Training is an ongoing process. It's important to make sure your employees are adequately trained on their job, and it can be highly beneficial to do cross-training for employees. Many shops report that fully cross-trained employees bring increased value to the company because they can see the bigger picture and help in multiple areas. This can lead to improved quality and efficiency. Evaluate skillsets regularly to identify employees that can serve the company in additional roles. Encourage honest input and communication from all members of your shop. Line operators can be a gold mine of information as they observe the process continuously, notice when something isn't right, and provide valuable feedback based on their perspective. Tapping into your team's expertise can help control staff turnover, identify areas of concern, and improve employee morale.



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