



Developing shop employees for the field

4 traits necessary to turn shop talent into functional field fabricators

By Dan Davis, Editor-in-Chief

It began as a simple question in a group discussion area on a social media site: “Where do you find fabricating talent for fieldwork?” All of the answers had one common theme: It’s not easy to find those suited for field fabrication.

What about those contract welders who say they want to settle down? Apparently, they do want to settle down and work for one company—for a while. The hiring managers believe they ultimately miss being out on the road, as well as the typically large paychecks that come with the nomadic work.

What about looking for field fabricating talent in a different industry, such as pipe fitting? Many fitters don’t have the welding skills needed for some aspects of field fabricating. Also, they don’t have the specific experience necessary to tackle the va-

riety of tasks they might encounter on a job site—from detailed finishing to customer relationship management.

The consensus in this online discussion appeared to be to develop your own in-house talent. That’s obviously easier said than done as manufacturers across the U.S. look to fill thousands of open positions for skilled workers inside the shop, not just out in the field. That, however, doesn’t mean it can’t be done. It’s just a matter of looking for the right skill sets and personality traits. From there, a fabricator can begin the molding process as the company develops its new field fabricating talent.

Trait No. 1: Versatility

Shickel Corp., a Bridgewater, Va.-based shop that has a thriving field business in areas such as ornamental metal fabrication and pharmaceutical and food processing equipment installation, requires

Not just any shop floor fabricator can make the transition to being a field fabricator. It takes a particular make-up to deal with the challenging elements and people that are commonplace at work sites.

its field service personnel to have a varied skill set. An employee might be asked to do high-end gas tungsten arc welding in a pharmaceutical facility one week and then the next week be called upon to work with shielded metal arc welding on structural steel.

“We need people who can work in all environments depending on the product mix we have available,” said Jeff Stapel, Shickel’s human resources manager.

The company actually uses the term “millwright” to describe the fabricators who work in the field. While these field fabricators may not be installing and maintaining machinery in the traditional sense of the millwright profession, they are “craftsmen” who have to rely on their skills to install fabrications in diverse construction and industrial settings.

“We have a better success rate with people we’ve grown internally who started out as mill ones [the label Millwright I] or who are internal in the shop and we have built a relationship with,” Stapel said. “Our success rate with getting people who are 10- or 20-year field people to fit our organization hasn’t been real great because of trust issues. We have a much better success rate bringing people in early in their career and matching them with our longer-service skilled people.”

Trait No. 2: Flexibility

Mark DeBellis, president, Suburban Steel Supply Co., Gahanna, Ohio, thinks his field fabricators need the right attitude to cope with the reality of working at a construction site. It’s a soft skill that can’t be taught at a vocational school or in an apprenticeship program.

“The attitude to be flexible is really a must in the field because the conditions are never the same and literally are uncontrollable from job to job, site to site, day to day. So you have to have the right attitude to be successful,” DeBellis said.

Field fabricators might face dramatic temperature swings, strong winds, or unanticipated precipitation as they work to hit production deadlines. And those are just the weather-related problems. That doesn’t even begin to cover the surprises of being on a work site where one person’s job is dependent on others doing their jobs. A field fabricator has to be able to adapt to changes in schedule and work environment.

It’s really about maturity, DeBellis said. If a person displays immature behaviors in the shop—such as not showing up on time or failing to handle a stressful production deadline—he is not going to be mature in the field.

That’s why company management looks for these traits in their shop floor employees. If they see an employee that is mature enough to tackle almost anything the scheduler can throw his way, management might assign him to a three- or four-man field crew. That presents a situation in which the shop

floor fabricator can make the transition to the field in a measured manner, learning what is expected on the job site over time and picking up tips that make on-site erecting and fabricating easier.

According to DeBellis, for some rookie field fabricators, it might boil down to a simple proposition: Can they work at certain heights? If they feel uncomfortable in an aerial lift device, they will have a difficult time doing the job at the construction site.

Trait No. 3: Good People Skills

Kevin Raymond, chief fabricator, K&E Sheet Metal, South Glens Falls, N.Y., is half of a two-man shop that primarily fabricates and installs ductwork for residential and commercial construction projects. The other owner is his dad, Bob, who has 35 years of experience in this field.

And for a majority of that time, his dad has worked in the field. In fact, the two assumed two distinct roles about five years ago: Kevin headed to the shop to prep the fabrications and run the business, and Bob handled the installations. Kevin still hasn't forgotten his lessons learned from his eight years in the field, however.

"My biggest challenge when I started wasn't even learning how to make the fabrications," he said. "It was dealing with the customers and their idiosyncrasies."

In some instances, Raymond said, he could be working at a residence with the homeowner breathing down his neck to see that the job was done right. In other instances, he said, the homeowner wouldn't be hovering because he was staying out of the freezing temperatures and keeping warm. Regardless of what is going on, the fabricator representing K&E out in the field, whether it's Kevin or Bob, has to ensure the job is done correctly and within project costs.

"I've definitely learned that if you're going to run a business like this where you are in people's homes, you have to have both sides. You have to know what you're doing, but you also have to deal with people," Raymond said. "There's a psychology to it."

Trait No. 4: Independence

Shickel's Stapel said field fabricators need to display entrepreneurialism—the ability to lead a project without the direct, day-to-day supervision that often exists in a shop.

"They are a little bit of the cowboy," he said. "They like the independence and control. They don't like people looking over their shoulders. So they need to have the kind of independence ingrained in them, which is different than the guys in the shop."

There is probably no better analogy than comparing field fabricators to cowboys. Just like cowboys are hard to find in today's modern world, good field fabricators can be as difficult to locate. Luckily for metal fabricators, grooming shop floor talent for field applications appears to be a tried-and-true method for filling out the ranks of field

service crews. On the other hand, there's no telling where the next generation of cowboys is coming from. **FAB**

Editor-in-Chief Dan Davis can be reached at dand@thefabricator.com.

K&E Sheet Metal LLC, 22 Hudson Falls Road, #3, South Glens Falls, NY 12803, 518-746-0182, www.kesheetmetal.com

Shickel Corp., 115 Dry River Road, Bridgewater, VA 22812, 540-828-2536, www.shickel.com

Suburban Steel Supply Co., 1900 Deffenbaugh Court, Gahanna, OH 43230, 614-737-5501, www.suburbansteelsupply.com

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