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AHEAD OF THE CURVE:

How Converters Can Stay at the Forefront of a Rapidly Changing Industry



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PRINTING AND PACKAGING: THE NEXT GENERATION

Workforce development has been among the top challenges in the package printing industry in recent years. It's important to understand why this is, and what can be done about it.

By Chris Bauer

For the most part, the top challenges facing package printers and converters deal directly with their day-to-day tasks. Run lengths are decreasing. Technological advancements are tough to keep up with. Turn-around times are getting shorter. But across the industry, one seemingly universal challenge stands out from the production-based hurdles. Finding, hiring and retaining qualified employees is becoming more difficult than ever.

At the Phoenix Challenge Foundation, a nonprofit organization promoting education and opportunities for young people in the flexographic industry, a key part of its mission is to help students find careers in printing. But according to Bettylyn Krafft, chairman of The Phoenix Challenge, several factors are causing the shortage of qualified graphic arts employees, especially among younger workers.

“One [problem] is that a lot of the graphic arts programs have been pulled out of high schools,” she states. “The second issue is that when we do have programs out there in high schools and colleges, the converters usually don't support the programs as they should.”

Among the ways the Phoenix Challenge Foundation promotes flexography to students is through printing competitions. With annual competitions for high school and college teams, students are tested in operating a flexo press, prepress and plate making skills, written knowledge and flexo math skills.

Krafft states that she frequently hears from printers and converters who tell her that they are in need of press operators or are short on labor, but then don't take the next step in supporting printing education programs. She explains that it can be expensive for a school to start a graphic arts program, and finding the necessary floor space can be a challenge. But with the help of local printers “adopting” a program, it can help it get off the ground, and open up a new career path to students.

“It has to do with dollars and cents,” she says. “We have schools right now that are dying to start a printing program.”

At the college level, there are multiple two- and four-year schools offering printing-related programs. One of the most recognizable is Clemson University, but according to Dr. Nona Woolbright, associate professor and graduate coordinator of Clemson's Graphic Communications department, most students in the department don't have a graphics art background from high school.



Image courtesy of Nona Woolbright.

Dr. Nona Woolbright of Clemson University's Graphic Communications department has encouraged students to explore career paths in print.

“Back in the 1980s, the focus became that everybody needs to go to college,” Woolbright explains. “So defunding started to happen with vocation tracks at high schools. Now there are so very few feeder schools.”

Although admittedly not the norm, Clemson has no shortage of students interested in majoring in Graphic Communications. This is partly due to the popularity of the university and a strong alumni base, Woolbright says.

“We get [students] here in the first semester and we tell them to look around their dorm room — there is print everywhere,” Woolbright says. “We have them think about how it happens, and either they fall in love with it or they say it is not for me.”

Clemson Graphic Communications students complete a pair of internships, allowing them to become exposed to a wide range of technology and processes. Woolbright

adds that employers need to realize that if they want to attract the top interns, a paid internship program is vital.

“Offer an onboarding process so they feel welcomed and appreciated,” she suggests. “You have to kind of mentor them and nurture them.”

One company thinking outside the box in its employee recruitment and retention strategies is Poly Print, a Tucson, Ariz.-based flexible packaging printer.

Poly Print uses a wide range of methods to recruit new employees, including local advertising, job fairs, social media, networking events, word of mouth and employee referrals. The company recently created an HR Generalist position to handle the hiring process.

“Recruiting, interviewing, hiring and retaining is a full-time job,” Joe Genova, VP of Poly Print, maintains. “It is something that never goes away and requires just as much attention as customer service.”

Once an employee is hired, Poly Print strives to keep its staff satisfied so they remain in the fold.

“Defining a career path and compensation increases is



The Phoenix Challenge Foundation operates multiple student competitions, including a High School Competition that tests flexographic printing skills.

one thing that we have put emphasis on recently,” Genova reveals. “We offer comprehensive training programs for new employees, which we believe leads to better job satisfaction.”

Training at Poly Print involves a series of comprehensive in-house training videos and follow-up testing. This



A high school team in action during the Phoenix Challenge Foundation's High School Competition. The High School Competition has been held for more than 20 years.

“After these new recruits try and wrap their mind around what is going on, they then get to see the type of customers we are doing business with,” Genova adds. “Without fail, most of the products we are printing they use in their very own homes.

We work with the largest brands in the world and if that isn't enough to create some excitement, especially for the younger generation, then I don't know what is.”

is partnered with hands-on, on-the-job training with experienced department leads.

“Even though we hire an individual for a specific job in a specific department, we find that it is beneficial that they receive basic training in the other departments of the company,” Genova notes. “By doing so, they have a well-rounded understanding of how their job affects other departments in the company.”

Poly Print, which operates out of an 80,000-sq.-ft. facility, was recently nominated for a Tucson Metro Chamber Copper Cactus award for best employer in the area. Genova feels his shop leaves a positive impression on prospective employees thanks to good lighting, newer equipment and a busy and exciting production floor.

According to Krafft, some companies have misconceptions about what young job seekers crave in terms of a career path and how to recruit and retain new employees. She suggests employers take the time to teach and mentor young people interested in a graphic arts career.

“I hear from people that say they are not going to hire someone right out of college because they don’t want to be press operators, but that simply is not true,” Krafft says. “There are many students out there [who] do want to be press operators or supervisors on the floor, and are willing to work their way through.”

Woolbright explains she frequently brings students to trade shows and other industry events. While this experience leaves an impression on the next generation of graphic arts professionals, it is not always a positive one. She reports that students are often ignored or not taken seriously by vendors and printing company representatives.

“I take students to a lot of conferences and you never see young people there,” she adds. “All you see is older people, and almost always all male.”

However, according to a research survey Woolbright conducted, this is not in line with the potential next wave of graphic arts employees. Woolbright notes that her re-search showed that, overwhelmingly across all educational systems, the majority of students enrolled are female.

“So you take these young ladies to these conferences and all they see is, for lack of a better word, their dad,”

Woolbright continues. “They have nobody to relate to. I have always wondered, why don’t companies bring their younger staff to some of these things?”

Woolbright says she would like to see both vendors and converters make an investment in the future and get more students excited about and interested in the industry. She suggests exposing young people to all the possibilities and opportunities for a lifetime career in the graphic arts.

“One of the big things for students, when they go out to meet with companies, is culture,” Woolbright says. “That seems to be No. 1, even maybe slightly above salary. And it doesn’t have to be a crazy Google-type of company culture. But at least a culture where the senior management seems to care about their employees.”

Krafft adds that a lot of employers don’t think about the total package when hiring entry-level employees, and how it is an investment in the company’s future.

“For the kids that are coming out of high school, you still have to pay them a wage in which they can support themselves,” she points out. “Some of these employers want to pay \$10 an hour, but you can’t survive on \$10 an hour on your own. These kids are trained and are ready to be an adult. But they need a livable wage and a lot of them need a mentor. They need someone to help guide them through the first couple of years.” **pP**