Solving the Challenge of Finding Workers

Finding experienced sign, graphics and visual communications industry workers is a challenge. Several ISA member companies have opted to train employees internally to develop industry knowledge and experience from within. Events like Sign Manufacturing Day, sponsored annually by ISA in conjunction with the National Association of Manufacturers, have promoted the growth of relationships between industry companies, educators, and students.

One example is DeNyse Companies in Douglasville, Ga., which recently partnered with Douglas County School System to offer internships to students in its technical programs. Student welders now work at the sign company one day per week.

“The students the school has sent are certainly the best in their program,” said Thesie Peacock, DeNyse’s executive officer who oversees training and administration. “They’re very mature, very courteous, very respectful.”

DeNyse has seen such rapid growth in the past year, they have to rotate students into the program two at a time on a weekly basis. The students learn quite a bit about the industry through the internship. During the first month, students focus on safety and understanding more about the company. In the second, they begin helping the fabrication staff by going over plans and drawings, as well as learning specifics about materials used. As they gain more experience, they will be doing supervised tack and tig welding. “The school system supplied us with a list of skills they hope will be included, so we created our agenda based on those skills,” Peacock said.

This “real-life” experience allows the students to learn more while helping them understand the industry—and it creates career potential.

“That’s one of the goals – that the students would be a good prospect for us to bring on board [to grow] with us,” Peacock said.

DeNyse Companies came from humble beginnings; Jennifer and Allen DeNyse started the business in the basement of their home in 1983. Allen was on the technical school’s board when it was just a concept, and he worked with the school system to develop trades that would benefit the sign, graphics and visual communications industry. As DeNyse Companies grew, Allen had the vision to have a “Sign School” criteria established to help encourage company growth organically. His enthusiasm and support for the school is what brought the internship program to DeNyse.

This program started with the 2016-2017 school year and is showing extraordinary potential. Students in the program must already have a defined technical career goal and are “very motivated” to learn more about the industry.

Poyant Signs, based in New Bedford, Mass., has the advantage of being located where there are experienced welders, but keeping them in the sign industry can prove challenging. “A lot of welders here have experience in steel, but not aluminum,” said Joseph Pellerin, Poyant’s human resources manager and safety officer. “They work in shipyards, where they lay down very thick beads. We’ve tried pairing them with more senior sign fabricators, but they generally don’t stay with us too long because our particular type of welding is not their niche.”

As a result of this issue, Poyant Signs made the decision to actively recruit trained welders by participating in Sign Manufacturing Day. One welding student leaving Poyant Sign told her teacher that she could see herself working at Poyant. Another graphic arts student was enthused by the design department. Because of the positive feedback from students, a co-op program was born.

Pellerin sees definite advantages to working with students who are eager to learn the industry. “Technically, they have the basics down and we can train them to learn the trade itself,” he said. “There’s no school that will teach these students to build signs. We see the value in doing that.”

Poyant has had successes with similar programs in the past. One student came into the company as a painter and stayed for several
39% of those companies expect to hire in production and installation.

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years. A current fabricator graduated from the co-op program 21 years ago and has been at Poyant Sign since then. “We understand the value in bringing in young people,” Pellerin said. “They seem to stay longer.”

While there are restrictions, especially for the co-op students who have not yet turned 18, Pellerin makes sure the students learn while adhering to the state safety laws. Students cannot drive forklifts, operate power equipment or saws before the age of 18. “It may limit them some on what they can do until they turn 18,” he said. “It’s just a matter of knowing what the restrictions are and following them.”

Students Gain Experience in Part-Time Jobs

At Cummings Resources’ Dothan, Ala., facility, experienced welders work alongside students from nearby Wallace Community College. It is another example of a program born out of Sign Manufacturing Day. When staff from the college visited Cummings’ facility, they inquired about ways that students could get hands-on experience. Cummings jumped at the chance to give students an opportunity to gain experience and to build relationships between the company and potential new employees.

Students selected to the program work part-time at the facility during the school year and full-time during the summer. The hope is that they will join Cummings after they graduate, according to Sarah Norris, Cummings’ human resources generalist. The certificate program at the college lasts for two semesters for students in stick and mig welding. A four-semester program adds Tig and pipe welding.

The community college is now in the process of developing a sheet metal program, for which Cummings is serving as an advisor.

“The students are already helping us fulfill production,” Norris said. “When they graduate, we hope to bring them on full-time. It’s a win-win for all of us.”

Finding skilled workers has been a challenge for that facility, Norris said; about 60% of applicants do not meet the basic requirements. “There are a few other manufacturing facilities, but the experience we see doesn’t really translate to the sign, graphics and visual communications industry. Finding the best talent for the open orders has been challenging.”

Given that the Dothan, Ala., plant has grown rapidly, the staffing challenges have been acute—and the students have played a big role in meeting those challenges. Cummings hopes to extend the program to include local high schools in the future.

Norris notes, “Building a relationship and trying to set up some co-op programs is beneficial to us as well as the students. They get experience. We get help with production. We can train them and hopefully they’ll become full time employees. It’s a different avenue than typical recruiting, whether through unemployment offices or advertising. This is setting up a relationship between the industry and students.”

It’s a relationship that, for many companies in the industry, can pay off for many years to come.

RESOURCES

ISA has developed a number of resources designed to help sign, graphics and visual communications companies reach out to students on Sign Manufacturing Day and throughout the year. The ISA Career Center includes a job board, where companies can post open positions—including internships—as well as search resumes of those looking for work.

All are linked on the ISA Career Center web page, www.signs.org/careers.