

Building the Next Generation of Blow Molding Professionals

Developing the workforce that will keep our industry running

“We need to stop searching for the technicians we wish existed and start building the technicians our industry needs.”

Opening

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I want to talk about something that I believe is becoming just as important to the future of blow molding as the machines, controls, automation, and technology we invest in - and that is people.

Across our industry, we have equipment that can operate for decades. We rebuild it, upgrade it, improve the controls, and find ways to make it more productive. But the people who know how to operate, maintain, troubleshoot, and optimize that equipment are becoming harder to find.

Today I want to focus on how we can build the next generation of blow molding technicians, maintenance professionals, process specialists, and service technicians - and why that responsibility belongs to all of us.

There is one message I want everyone to remember today:

“We need to stop searching for the technicians we wish existed and start building the technicians our industry needs.”

For years, many companies have approached hiring by looking for somebody who already has five, ten, or fifteen years of blow molding experience. Those people are valuable, but there simply are not enough of them.

If every processor, OEM, and service organization is competing for the same small group of experienced technicians, we are moving people around the industry instead of expanding the talent pool.

Our long-term solution has to be developing new people.

1. Why This Matters Now

Most of us have seen this challenge firsthand.

An experienced technician retires or leaves, and suddenly everyone realizes how much information that individual carried with them.

Maybe they knew a particular machine better than anyone else. Maybe they understood an older hydraulic system, an electrical problem, a process adjustment, or a machine-specific issue that was never written down.

We can replace a component. We can purchase another machine. Replacing thirty years of experience is much more difficult.

That makes workforce development a business-continuity issue, not simply an HR issue.

So this is the question I think every organization should be asking:

Who are we preparing to take their place?

Think about your strongest maintenance person, process technician, operator, or service specialist. If that person were no longer available tomorrow, who could step into that role?

If the answer is nobody - or we are not sure - that tells us where the opportunity is.

Succession in technical positions has to begin before the experienced person leaves.

2. Change the Hiring Question

Instead of asking, “Where can I find someone with ten years of blow molding experience?” I think we should ask, “What characteristics does someone need so we can develop them into a great blow molding technician?”

Look for mechanical aptitude, electrical ability, curiosity, work ethic, and problem-solving skills.

There are talented people in automotive repair, industrial maintenance, HVAC, electrical trades, the military, vocational schools, and other manufacturing sectors.

They may not understand extrusion blow molding on day one.

That is okay.

We can teach blow molding.

It may be more sustainable to hire for aptitude and attitude and then provide a structured technical development program.

This approach changes our workforce strategy from competing for a limited number of experienced people to creating new technical talent.

3. Attract the Next Generation

We also have to do a better job explaining what these careers actually are.

If we tell a young person, “Come work in a factory,” that may not communicate the opportunity very well.

Instead, show them what the job really involves.

You are going to learn PLCs, hydraulics, pneumatics, electrical controls, automation, processing, molds, tooling, and mechanical systems.

You are going to troubleshoot sophisticated equipment and learn skills that are valuable throughout manufacturing.

You may eventually become the person everyone calls when a machine is not running correctly.

That is a career.

We need stronger relationships with vocational schools, community colleges, high schools, apprenticeship programs, and skilled-trade organizations.

Most importantly, get students inside manufacturing facilities. Let them see the equipment. Let them talk with technicians. Let them understand that modern manufacturing offers highly technical career opportunities.

We are not simply offering someone a job. We are offering them the opportunity to become a highly skilled technical professional.

4. Training Has to Reach the Machine

Once we attract people, we have to develop them effectively.

I believe technical development needs three things: theory, hands-on experience, and repetition.

First, explain what the system does and why.

Second, connect that theory to the actual machine.

Third, let the technician perform the task repeatedly until they can demonstrate the skill without someone standing beside them.

Training should not end when somebody attends a class. The real measurement is whether they can apply what they learned when the machine is down and production is waiting.

Blow molding is especially suited to hands-on training.

If we are teaching hydraulics, give the technician a hydraulic schematic and have them trace the circuit on the machine.

If we are teaching electrical troubleshooting, have them work from prints and safely use a meter.

If we are teaching processing, make a controlled adjustment and let them see what happens to the bottle.

If we are teaching parison programming, show them how the change affects material distribution.

If we are teaching machine or mold alignment, let them actually measure it.

A technician develops confidence when they understand not only what adjustment to make, but why they are making it and what result they should expect.

Sometimes the most valuable training happens when we create a controlled problem and allow the developing technician to diagnose it.

That process teaches troubleshooting rather than simply teaching a list of answers.

5. Create a Visible Career Path

Development is easier when employees can see where they are going.

A company might establish an entry level, Technician Level 1, Technician Level 2, Senior Technician, Lead Technician, Process Specialist, Controls Specialist, Trainer, Service Technician, or Technical Manager.

The titles are not as important as defining the competencies.

At the entry level, the requirements might include safety, inspections, machine operation, lubrication, and basic mechanical fundamentals.

The next level could add hydraulics, pneumatics, mold changes, process fundamentals, and basic troubleshooting.

Advanced levels could include electrical diagnostics, processing, machine alignment, root-cause analysis, advanced troubleshooting, and the ability to train others.

Now advancement is based on demonstrated skills.

The employee knows what they need to learn next, and management has a measurable way to evaluate technical development.

This also connects directly to retention.

If an employee cannot see what their next step is, another company may provide that next step for them.

People want to know that learning more, taking responsibility, and becoming more technically capable leads somewhere.

A visible development path gives them a reason to continue investing in themselves - and in the organization.

6. Mentorship and Knowledge Transfer

Mentorship is one of the strongest tools we have, but it needs structure.

Simply telling a new technician, “Go work with Joe,” is not enough.

Give the mentor and trainee objectives.

This month might be the clamp system. Next month could be extrusion. Then hydraulics, electrical troubleshooting, processing, and preventive maintenance.

At the end of each section, the developing technician should demonstrate the skill.

That changes mentorship from shadowing into an actual development program.

We should also recognize experienced employees for teaching. Knowledge transfer should be considered part of the job, not something they do only when they have extra time.

We also need to capture knowledge before it disappears.

Experienced technicians know things that may never appear in an OEM manual.

When somebody solves an unusual problem, document it.

Take pictures. Create a short procedure. Record a training video. Add it to a troubleshooting guide.

Build machine-specific checklists. Document common failures. Develop preventive-maintenance standards.

A question I like is:

“How do we make the next technician solve this problem faster?”

If we ask that after every difficult repair, we gradually build a technical knowledge base that belongs to the organization instead of only to an individual.

7. Collaboration Across the Industry

I do not think processors can solve this alone, and I do not think OEMs or independent service providers can solve it alone either.

Each group brings something different.

Processors provide the real production environment.

OEMs understand their equipment and engineering.

Independent service organizations see many plants, machine generations, and failure modes.

Suppliers bring specialized component expertise.

Technical schools understand education and foundational skill development.

Imagine connecting those resources instead of each organization building everything from scratch.

Processors could provide internships and real equipment exposure.

OEMs and service providers could help provide technical curriculum, instructors, and machine knowledge.

Suppliers could provide component-specific training.

Technical schools could build the foundation in electrical systems, mechanics, PLCs, hydraulics, and industrial maintenance.

Experienced professionals could serve as mentors.

That is how we create an industry talent pipeline rather than simply filling individual openings.

8. What Organizations Can Start Doing Tomorrow

The good news is that you do not need a massive budget to begin.

Start by identifying the technical knowledge your organization cannot afford to lose.

Create a basic technician skill matrix.

Pair one experienced employee with one developing employee.

Document one recurring troubleshooting problem.

Contact one vocational school or community college.

Build Level 1, Level 2, and advanced training expectations.

Recognize employees who teach others.

And give developing technicians protected time to learn.

That last point matters.

If the experienced technician always takes over because it is faster, the newer technician never develops.

Sometimes training takes longer today so that the repair takes less time tomorrow.

Giving people permission to learn is an investment in future capability.

9. The Investment Mindset

Think about how we treat our machines.

We perform preventive maintenance. We monitor condition. We replace worn components. We rebuild equipment. We upgrade controls.

We spend money today because we want that equipment to perform tomorrow.

Workforce development deserves the same mindset.

Training, mentorship, documentation, and career development are preventive maintenance for the technical capability of the organization.

If we wait until the knowledge is gone, we are already behind.

The next generation of blow molding professionals is not simply going to appear.

We have to build them.

Closing

We have to identify people with potential.

We have to give them meaningful hands-on training.

We have to create career paths.

We have to put experienced people in a position to teach.

We have to capture the knowledge they have developed over decades.

And we have to work together across the industry.

The machines we install today may still be producing bottles twenty or thirty years from now.

The question is:

Who will have the knowledge to keep them running?

That answer depends on what we do today.

If there are three things I hope you remember, they are these:

Build the people.

Transfer the knowledge.

Strengthen the industry.

And remember:

“We need to stop searching for the technicians we wish existed and start building the technicians our industry needs.”

Thank you.