



[TURNAROUND MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE UPDATE]

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The technology 'crutch'

During the May NPRA Reliability & Maintenance Conference we shared a few stories about how things used to be with some young people new to our industry. The stories ranged from funny to scary while others were downright sad. Back then, we took many risks to plan and execute our projects. We learned how, when and why to do something a certain way. We went through many cycles of trial-and-error and we got better.

Although we improved our methodology, we overlooked something very important — we didn't build a platform to harvest what we learned. We passed it on to the one or two new folks in our team, but we never put a process in place, either in our companies or as an industry, to help develop the next generation. We were so busy planning for the turnaround that we didn't plan for the turnover.

A shortage of talent, an abundance of crutches

We inadvertently created two major issues: the shortage of good project controls talent, which we all can relate to, and the use of technology as a "crutch"

for the lack of knowledge and skills. I've spoken about the talent gap and the solutions needed for training and educating the industry, but now it's time to focus more attention on our industry's over-reliance on technology. The great architect Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "If it (technology) keeps up, man will atrophy all his limbs but the push-button finger." So let's stop pushing buttons and use our brains for a minute.

Having worked in the industry for more than 40 years, I've seen many "innovations" that made things better. Handheld calculators replaced handwritten calculations then computers came along and we were able to do more complex calculations. Computerization allowed us to both document and change our project plans. Then we were able to have project management applications and sophisticated databases help us tie all our work and financials into increasingly complex analyses. Although I don't miss the days of drawing critical path networks by hand, there was value in the way the old methods helped build that generation's knowledge and instincts about how project controls actually work.

Thinking is not out of style

We can't take our ability to reason for granted. All the advances in technology can't change the fact that we still have to think about our work and put all the data into context to come up with a conclusion. We enjoy the way technology has given us solutions, such as e-mail and project management software, but we also create new issues such as information overload and knowledge gaps. At that point we're back to the core issue of what we have to face every day; we have to think. We have to take our time, gather our facts, analyze data, put it into context and come to some kind of judgment call on the next course of action. We too often let the software, or some other stand-in tool, do the thinking for us.

We rely so heavily upon technology that it has become a crutch in many cases. Does Primavera™ make you a better scheduler? No, it does not. But it does make a good scheduler more effective. On one turnaround I audited, the schedulers were using Primavera to create a work and punch list; there was no schedule. Software is a tool not a brain; it can't think for us. In fact, a software jockey with a lack of project controls

experience and little turnaround knowledge can generate more problems than can be done sans the technology. We must make sure that experience and knowledge are driving the technology.

I'm not bashing technology but I am reminding all of us that the current talent gap is creating another issue we have to manage. Technology has helped us get better, as long as we have the right talent applying it and if we're using it for the right reasons.

Can your people stand on their own two feet without technology, or are they using it as a crutch?

Your talent should be prepared to do what the industry expects of them. In some cases, that means doing more with less and that's a skill that many of us have forgotten. In order to develop that talent we must give them the right experiences, training and guidance rather just handing them a toolbox of technology. As for my own "push-button" fingers, well, they need a rest.

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