

Breaking barriers in manufacturing

Thomas Shorma

Thomas Shorma is based at WCCO Belting, Wahpeton, North Dakota, USA.

Located just south of Fargo, ND, WCCO Belting is a second-generation, family-owned company that manufactures custom-built rubber conveyor belting for the agriculture, light industrial, construction, sand and gravel, packaging and recycling industries worldwide. Like much of North Dakota, unemployment rates are close to zero per cent in WCCO's hometown of Wahpeton, which means the pool of available candidates to fill open positions on the company's manufacturing floor is limited.

Given this challenge, the WCCO Belting team has had to dig deeper when it comes to developing hiring strategies and creating programs to help retain and engage employees. The company has honed its first impression with new applicants, created a robust training program to reduce the fear of the unknown for employees new to manufacturing, especially women and new Americans, and opened lines of communication between employees on the manufacturing floor and the leadership team. Today, the company has a laser-like focus on creating a workplace where employees can learn, grow, and be a part of a 65-year-old family business and its rich traditions.

Since turning its focus on better managing its first impression, employee engagement, training and retention, the company's turnover rate has drastically declined from 25 to 3 per cent, where it has held for the

past three years. What's more, during the same period, the company has increased its revenue and efficiency. WCCO Belting is shipping 20 per cent more product with 20 per cent fewer people.

However, what the company has learned along the way about eliminating barriers between people has perhaps been the most impactful. The company has systematically broken-down barriers when it comes to hiring a diverse pool of employees for its manufacturing jobs without compromising safety or quality. As a result, the WCCO manufacturing floor now is comprised of men and women, millennials and Baby Boomers, new Americans and lifelong North Dakotans all working side by side to produce the company's world-renowned rubber products.

How has the WCCO Belting team accomplished this and what recommendations do they have for other companies facing similar issues?

Breaking manufacturing myths with a great first impression

Manufacturers are regularly stereotyped as minimum-wage employers offering little to no benefits in exchange for monotonous work on a dirty, dark, and greasy production floor. With these myths in mind, it can be intimidating for job seekers both familiar and unfamiliar with manufacturing to not only apply but also strongly consider the business a

long-term career opportunity without knowing what goes on “in the back”.

WCCO Belting broke this barrier by significantly changing its interview strategy to be completely transparent with what the employee can expect from the company as an employer, and the conduct and performance the company expects of its employees in return. Its first approach is including a list of non-negotiable standards on its employment application. The applicant must agree to follow the company's guidelines regarding respect, loyalty, trust, courage and gratitude before being considered for an interview.

WCCO Belting's second approach to making a great first impression was to exchange the traditional conference room job interview for an invitation to take a full tour of the facility. During the tour, which is a minimum of an hour, WCCO Belting's production manager uses a more conversational interview style. The applicant learns about the history and culture of WCCO Belting, sees firsthand the activities of each work center on the manufacturing floor, and is encouraged to ask questions. This method not only promotes the company as an open and trustworthy employer but also helps the production manager learn where the applicant will best find job satisfaction.

Breaking the belief that you need experience in manufacturing to find success

Every manufacturing floor is different. Every company has their own equipment, processes, and even language. Because WCCO Belting wants any person to feel comfortable, applying for a career in manufacturing, leadership puts a major emphasis on training. The company emphasizes its uniqueness and uses it to justify why all new employees start on a level playing field and train side-by-side regardless

of past experience, age, gender, or first language.

In 2013, WCCO Belting faced a high turnover rate and realized finding new employees was becoming increasingly difficult in the small town's competitive job market. Company leadership made the strategic decision to invest in workforce development and switched its focus to supporting current employees through a targeted training program. Today, WCCO Belting's training team has designed more than 70 internal courses specific to the company's products, processes, and equipment. Classes come in the form of one-on-one training, group training, hands-on learning, brainstorming and more to guarantee training resonates with every type of learner.

To grow the training program and keep content relevant, the company asks employees what they would like to learn based on how their job will be impacted and implements new courses based on feedback. For instance, a production supervisor asked for a class on properly measuring belting. After putting up an interest sheet on the topic, 52 other people signed up for the class. Prior to implementing the training program, it was not known that this type of training was wanted or needed.

Breaking gender bias and cultural barriers to promote diversity on the manufacturing floor

After improving the company's first impression to new applicants, developing training materials to improve onboarding and assimilation, and promoting respect and equality, WCCO Belting became adept at recruiting workers new to the manufacturing industry, especially women and new Americans.

In general, 50 per cent of the potential workforce is made up of women. If women are not being considered to fill manufacturing roles, a huge portion of

the workforce is being ignored. Developing recruitment methods that attract women to the manufacturing industry is critical due to the area's shortage of skilled workers. More importantly, however, is that women add diversity and bring a new perspective to strategic thinking that can positively impact culture, efficiency and profitability.

The state of North Dakota attracts people of all nationalities and from different backgrounds because of its consistent top ranking in quality of life and other positive life metrics within the country. With the area's diverse population, WCCO Belting is able to hire employees that are diverse in background, culture, age and gender. In fact, there are over ten languages spoken on the company's production floor, including English.

WCCO Belting makes a conscious effort to promote neutrality between job responsibilities. Every role is unisex. Women, men, millennials, older adults, and new Americans all are provided the same responsibilities on the manufacturing floor. Anyone can run forklifts, work in shipping and receiving, run production equipment, or serve as supervisors. In fact, two-thirds of supervisors on the manufacturing floor are women.

For all employees, creating an appealing work environment has been a longstanding priority of WCCO Belting. We have learned that a valuable step a business can take to encourage employees' work-life balance is provide set shifts versus rotating shifts. It is easier for employees and their families, especially single-parent homes, to structure their personal lives and coordinate childcare.

Breaking the silence between company leadership and the manufacturing floor with transparency and communication

At WCCO Belting, employees are hired for careers, not jobs. The family-

owned business advocates everyone working together towards common goals. It encourages cross-functional teams and is transparent with the company's performance and metrics. For example, it has a monthly all-company meeting where departments rotate providing updates to employees and everyone can ask questions of company leaders and coworkers. This activity instills confidence in employees and makes them part of something bigger.

WCCO Belting's single most impactful approach to breaking the silence between the manufacturing floor and company leadership has been its unique take on a traditional employee suggestion program (also referred to as a process improvement program). Since its launch in 2014, over half of the 2,000 suggestions submitted by employees have been implemented.

Unlike a traditional employee suggestion or process improvement program where a lengthy cost-savings analysis determines implementation, the decision to move forward with an idea submitted via a short form is discussed between a cross-functional team of over 20 production and non-production personnel, including leadership that meets on a weekly basis. Who better

to know how to fix something or to create a more efficient process than the person who is working on it day to day? Not only does this demonstrate leadership's trust in employees to make educated decisions about their own activities, but also allows new employees to control their own work environment and drive positive change.

The techniques that WCCO Belting has been using to help break down barriers at the company can be used in any manufacturing facility located in a bustling city or in the rural countryside. No matter where a company is located or how big it is, it is important to think outside of the box to attract and retain a variety of talent from different backgrounds, ages, genders and skill levels.

About WCCO belting

WCCO Belting is a 65-year-old, family-owned, award-winning custom rubber product manufacturer for the agriculture, light industrial, construction, sand and gravel, packaging and recycling industries worldwide. The company is the value innovator in the global rubber belting industry, creating custom products using specialized equipment and

proprietary processes. WCCO focuses on the technological advancement of each raw material and belt component to provide high value rubber product solutions. Its design and manufacturing expertise are effective in lowering the total cost of ownership of their customer's equipment. For more information visit www.wccobelt.com and follow us on LinkedIn.

About the author

Thomas Shorma has been the CEO/ President of WCCO Belting, Inc. since late 2001. Under his leadership, WCCO experienced drastic growth and multiple facility expansions. Tom's vision and guidance helped the organization receive the President's "E" Award (2010) and "E-Star" Award (2016) for its export promotion efforts. A North Dakota native, Tom grew up in Wahpeton, attended the North Dakota State College of Science, and became a student-athlete at the University of North Dakota where he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Business. Today, Tom resides in Fargo with his wife and two young children. Thomas Shorma can be contacted at: Thomas.Shorma@wccobelt.com