Cross-training Tips and Techniques to Attract, Develop, and Retain Valuable Workers

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Introduction

The great resignation. Employee burnout. Boomer retirements. And the pandemic. All of these factors have created an unprecedented labor shortage that is forcing manufacturers to re-examine how they attract, retain, and make the most of a precious supply of talent and resources.

In a recent survey[1], more than half of U.S. workers say they're burned out, and around two out of five are considering a job change "to resolve stress." Many of these employees seek new opportunities in other industries with work environments that are safer and offer more pay and flexibility.

At the same time, more than 30 million Baby Boomers left the job market and retired in 2020, according to the Pew Research Center, creating a void being filled by Millennials who value completely different job qualities and work conditions.

According to a new study by Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute[2], the manufacturing skills gap in the U.S. could result in 2.1 million unfilled jobs by 2030. More than two-thirds of manufacturers say they will have ongoing difficulties attracting and retaining workers beyond the pandemic years.

You might be trying to combat these shortages with signing bonuses, higher pay, and better benefits. But even then, many employees can still migrate to the next manufacturer up the road with a better offer in hand. Many employers report that workers are gaming this incentive by sticking around just long enough to receive full signing bonuses and quitting the next day to get a another one elsewhere. Clearly you need a new way to distinguish your company when competing for new talent.

Cross-training can help by creating an unmatched work environment that offers a career path, community, safety, and a sense of value and structure. Instead of competing on compensation alone, cross-training can help you create a work environment that enables you and your employees to grow together over the long haul.

This eBook will address the challenges of creating a successful cross-training program and share techniques and best practices that can help you attract and retain employees and improve the overall operational efficiency of your organization.

1 "Employee Stress Check 2021," Talkspace for Business/The Harris Poll, September, 2021
2 "Creating Pathways for Tomorrow's Workforce Today: Beyond Reskilling in Manufacturing," Deloitte, May 2021

The Value of Cross-training

Cross-training does more than attract and retain employees. It can help build a sense of community and purpose within your company and prevent burnout. From an operational perspective, a solid cross-training program can ensure you always have the resources you need to maintain production, regardless of turnover or illnesses.

Here's a quick look at seven ways cross-training can help your organization.

1. Create an Opportunity for Growth

Employees who feel they have no future with their company are more likely to leave after a few months on the job. An employee that sees no path for growth at a company has little incentive to stay. Anything from a slightly higher wage, a shorter commute, more comfortable work setting, or even just wanting a day off with friends — knowing another job is just down the road — is enough reason to jump ship. However, by training your employees to perform other jobs and take on greater responsibility, you demonstrate confidence and a willingness to invest in their future with the company.

Employees are more likely to stick around if they believe they'll receive training that can help advance their careers and provide predictable outcomes for their compensation.

2. Enable Pay for Skills Compensation

In addition to rewarding employees for their tenure with your company, you can cross-train them to take on additional skills and responsibilities, which can be tied to pay raises.

Each new training level provides an opportunity to document and reward their growth. This also helps eliminate confusion about compensation models. It's not uncommon for employees who have been with companies for years but still performing entry-level jobs to be paid more than less tenured employees who readily accepts new, more advanced responsibilities. By financially incentivizing new skills, you can develop an employee base capable of working anywhere on the line when needed.

3. Create a Community and Connection with Others

When cross-training, your employees have an opportunity to meet new people, make more connections and experiences. Deeper connections and relationships with others will make them want to stay through hard times and hopefully band together to help the collective team succeed.

The additional training also enables them to understand how their work ties in and contributes to the overall success of your organization. Employees can have a career instead of a job.

Millennials are especially more likely to gravitate to and stay with jobs where they perceive value, inclusion, and a future. They like to see how their roles intersect with a company's overall purpose and function. And they want the opportunity to learn and expand into other jobs. They prefer a coach over a boss, and a career instead of a job.

Deeper connections and relationships with others will make them want to stay

4. Improve Productivity with Fewer Interruptions

Cross-training helps employees understand how their roles impact others and production goals. Knowing the bigger picture enables them to comprehend the importance of the quality behind their work. It becomes more than an individual task when they understand the chain reaction to their performance. Also, training employees to work in other departments or production lines means you always have a built-in resource to replace employees when they call in sick, take a vacation, or suddenly quit. Cross-training enables employers, for example, to have someone who works in sanitation to quickly switch over to production.

5. Simplify Scheduling of Resources

With a full roster of cross-trained employees for multiple jobs, it's easier to schedule production around busy times of the year, employee vacations, and illnesses. Most successful cross-training programs include a list of training each employee has received. Therefore, it's easier to see if someone is cross trained to cover an area that might need additional resources or to plan ahead to cover vacations or maternity leave.

6. Better Documentation

Companies with established cross-training programs will document when employees complete additional training. Technology can also help keep track of cross-training in progress, helping employers see who is close to mastering new tasks and positions. This approach helps them quickly identify replacements when another employee is unable to work their post. It helps evaluate and reward employees who have taken the extra steps to receive additional training. And it prepares employees to work in other departments or production lines when needed.

7. Greater Employee Retention

All of the advantages and benefits above will ultimately help you attract and retain employees for the long haul. Opportunities for career growth, a sense of value and personal connections, compensation tied to skills, predictable schedules, and safer work environments are all something you can create as a means of differentiating your company from other manufacturers. All combined, these elements that result from cross-training are something that can't be matched by signing bonuses and gimmicky promotions.

Opportunities for **career growth**, a **sense of value and personal connections**, **compensation tied to skills**, **predictable schedules**, and **safer work environments** are all something you can create as a means of differentiating your company from other manufacturers.

Common Barriers to Successful Cross-training

Manufacturers who try to create successful cross-training programs generally run into three main roadblocks — a lack of structure, time, and documentation. Many companies have new hires shadow a more senior employee for a short time and mistake that for cross-training. But it's far more than that.

Structure is needed to ensure the person providing training is following company policies and procedures. Has the training been properly vetted and documented? Is it effective and engaging?

Many organizations skip the foundational elements of true cross-training, such as establishing what "qualifies" an employee to perform a certain job, how frequently qualifications must be refreshed, and how.

True cross-training goes beyond demonstrating a particular skill. It includes a series of progressively more challenging lessons with confirmation that employees understand and are capable of performing the job

before advancing to the next level of instruction. Validation of ability is critical, as is the documentation of this validation. These sequential skill progressions must be treated like any other training course — with centrally vetted curriculum and governance plans in place to ensure the material stays current.

Yet training often loses consistency and can vary depending on the trainer. Sometimes trainers are selected for ability or past performance. But not all capable workers are equipped to be instructors. And who is responsible for rolling out and managing cross-training — plant management or HR?

You must also be able to determine if the right person has been selected to receive training. Are there guidelines to establish who is or isn't eligible? And there's the issue of ensuring the right job has been selected to be included in a cross-training initiative.

Is that role important enough to your company's goals and priorities?

And then, there's the issue of the time needed to develop and deliver training. HR is busy recruiting full-time. Managers are busy keeping production in play. And so, who has time and expertise to develop cross-training programs that teach skills according to proper company policy, meets regulatory safety standards, and has executive-level support.

And with talent in short supply, who has time to pull workers off the line to receive additional training?

Finally, there is the issue of documentation. After all, what is the point of cross-training if the outcomes are not accessible? The program must have a seamless tracking and reporting system built in from the get-go. It is critical to maintain instant visibility to each employee's progress as they work toward new skills. Gone are the days when an Excel spreadsheet could adequately suffice as a skills matrix to track who is qualified to perform which jobs. Technology can be your friend here, but it must be user-friendly and useful in both online and offline modes.

This next section will address these challenges and provide recommendations to help you create an effective cross-training program.
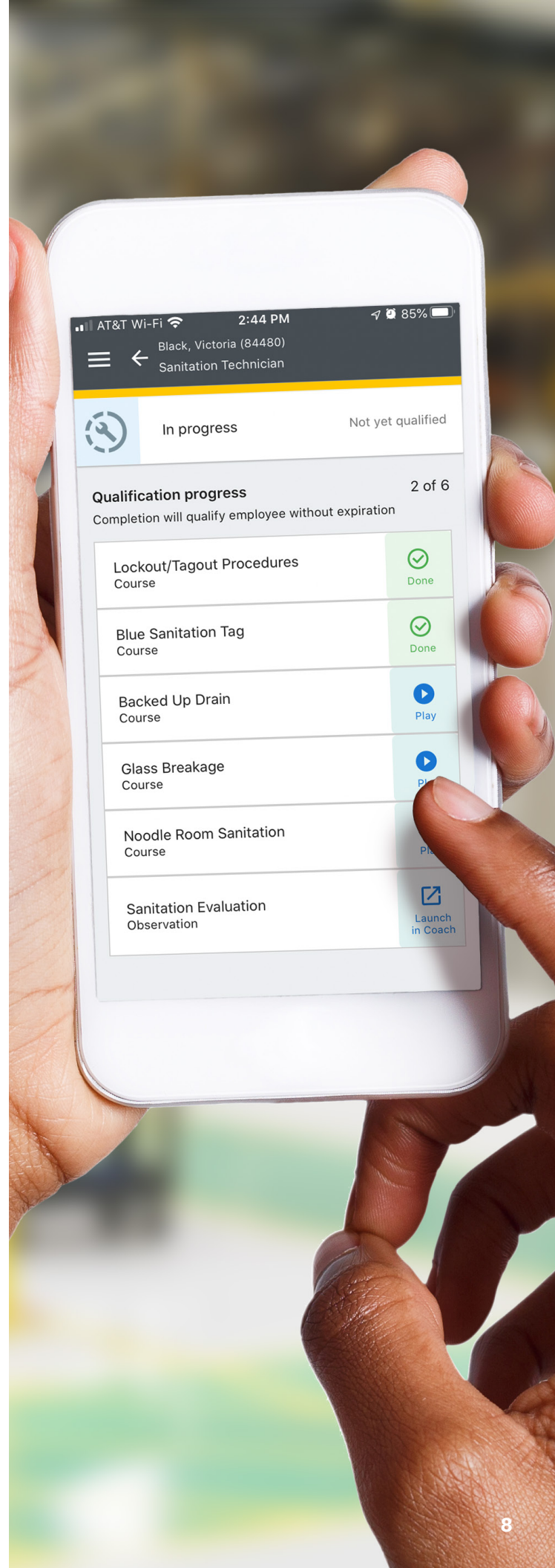
Tips & Techniques

Be Intentional: Identify the Right Jobs and the Right Way to Do Them

Successful cross-training starts with the basics of identifying the right jobs and the right way to do them. This means identifying the functions or equipment that you'll need the most, whether demand is caused by seasonal activities or the need to align production with specific company goals.

Identify jobs that can bring your production to a halt if no one is there to perform them. This is where you should be intentional about your cross-training efforts, which will help you be more productive in the long run. Remember that your goal should be more than actual training. It should be about developing the right kind of training that helps achieve your company goals.

Include leadership development tracks as well. Nearly all employees are motivated to learn new skills. And some may desire a path toward leadership. Be sure to provide this path or risk losing enormous potential. Your training must be flexible enough to meet changing demands, criteria, and situations. Consider how often regulations change to address new challenges like the pandemic. And look at the dynamic workforce defined by different employee demographics and attitudes. Will your training still be relevant and effective in a year? While it may be impossible to predict the future, it is possible to develop training that is easily updated and disseminated.

The "soft skills" of an effective leader don't automatically appear when someone is promoted to shift lead, but they can be developed with proper training.

And from there, identify and document the right way to conduct your work. It's not uncommon for multiple workers to have different ideas and practices on how best to perform their jobs. As a result, you might have an employee train a colleague based on their past experiences versus the approved company approach. Start with the right jobs and create job descriptions or standard operating procedures that ensure every employee learns the right way.

PRO TIP

Don't go it alone. The first step to building a cross-training program is to invite all departments in the effort. This also ensures buy-in and a vested interest in the results across the organization. Finally, don't be afraid to seek help outside the company. Often an outsider's set of eyes — either professional peers or experienced consultants — can lift a good plan to a great one.

Create and Document a Process for Selecting People to be Trained

Identifying the right people to receive training isn't as easy as it sounds. It's much more than simple supervisor recommendations. Nothing in this process can be subjective. Employees might charge favoritism or discrimination. And some manufacturers have to justify training and development to unions. And there's the issue of successfully finding the person who is truly right for the job.

That's why you have to be intentional about your selection process and partner with HR to develop rules and guidelines for being cross-trained and apply them equally to everyone. This might mean demonstrating a history of being on time, successful quality checks, or a lack of disciplinary issues. This approach is another example of applying structure to your cross-training program.

Cross-training can also serve as an incentive for employees to achieve the goals and requirements set forth in your document. The same approach should also apply to the process of selecting trainers.

By working with HR to develop these requirements, you can learn and support their point of view on people — and labor-management processes.

Train the Trainer

Even the best workers who follow all the procedures and don't cut corners might not be the best trainers. But with a consistent and structured approach, you can turn capable workers into capable trainers.

The best way to avoid trainers from winging it or teaching unapproved shortcuts is to give them tools to demonstrate the right way to do the job. You can also provide sample questions to ensure the person they're training is comprehending instructions.

Give them an established set of courses, tools, and scripts to train their colleagues. And then rate and evaluate them on their performance.

PRO TIP

Leverage mobile technology to create task-specific training. An easy-to-use app, such as Alchemy Playbook, combined with any smartphone or tablet's built-in camera enables you to:

- Record skilled workers performing tasks correctly.
- Add text instruction and quizzes to the video or photos to turn it into a training course.
- Cross-train other employees with the course right on the floor where they'll perform the work.
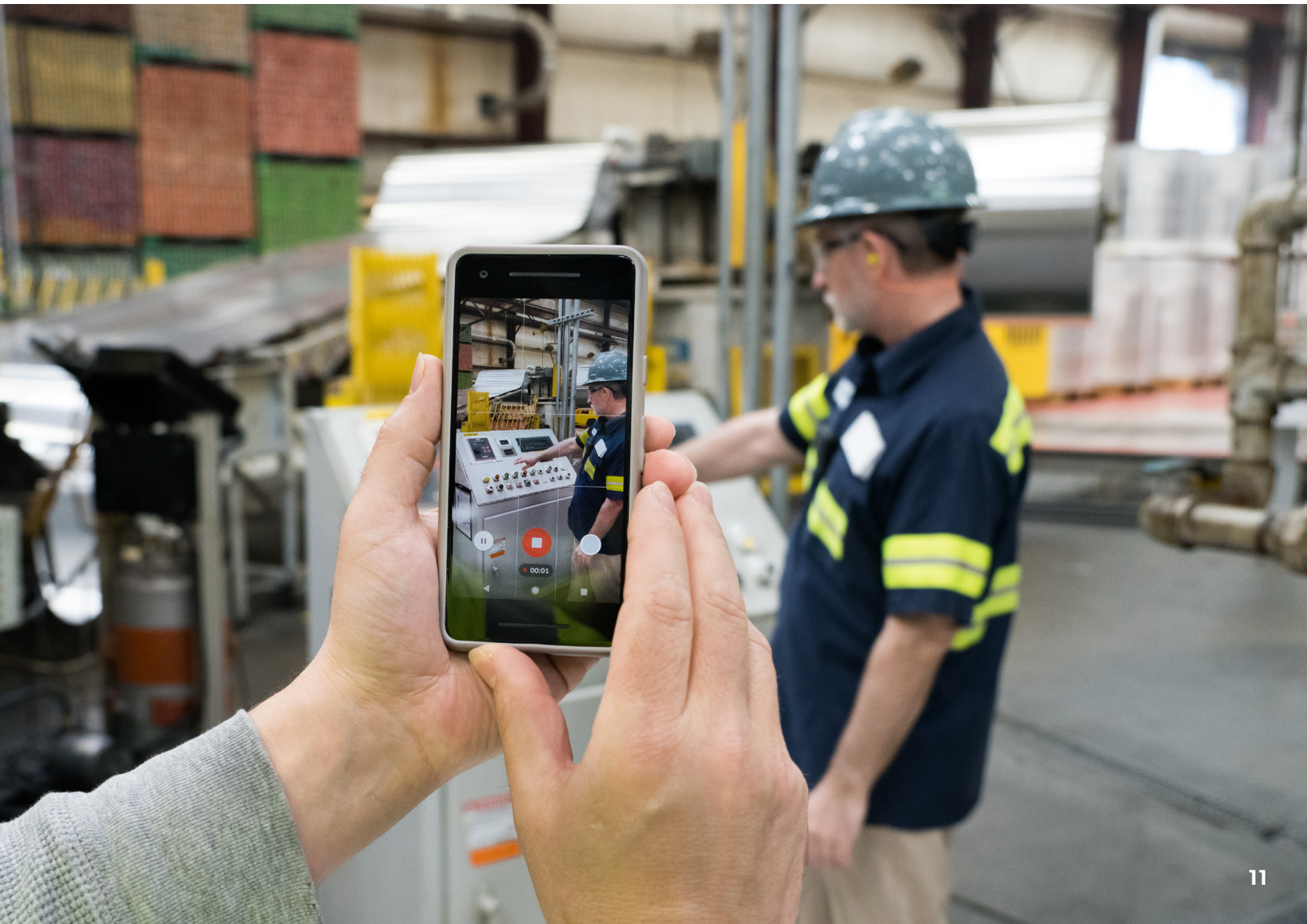
Communicate Clearly and Set Expectations

One of the biggest advantages of cross-training is to help employees understand the big picture. Someone who performs the same task every day probably doesn't understand how their efforts support overall production goals. Cross-training provides an opportunity to perform other functions and engage with other members of the team. The more they cross-train, the more they understand the "why" of their work and their training.

By working with HR to develop your cross-training requirements and procedures, managers also gain a clear understanding of how to set expectations and evaluate an employee performance. Greater cross-training means more skills, which can also be reflected in employee bonuses and pay raises.

By communicating the "why" behind your cross-training, you eliminate the potential for misunderstandings on the line. For example, if an employee sees someone else being trained for their job, they might mistakenly think they're being replaced. Instead, let them know the cross-training is intended to provide more resources when needed.
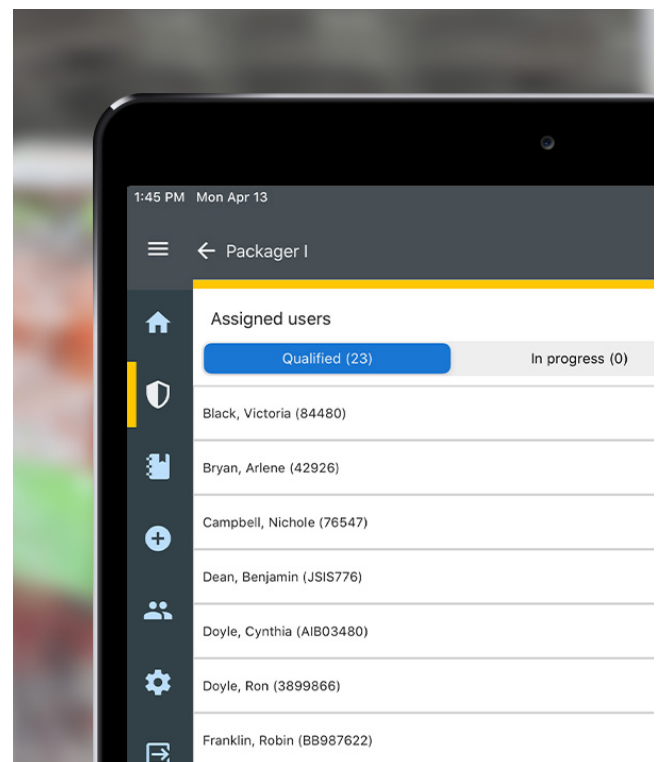
Ultimately all of this information should be communicated by the plant manager or general manager of your facility. When the information comes from the top, employees can better understand the importance of your cross-training initiative as part of the company's goals.
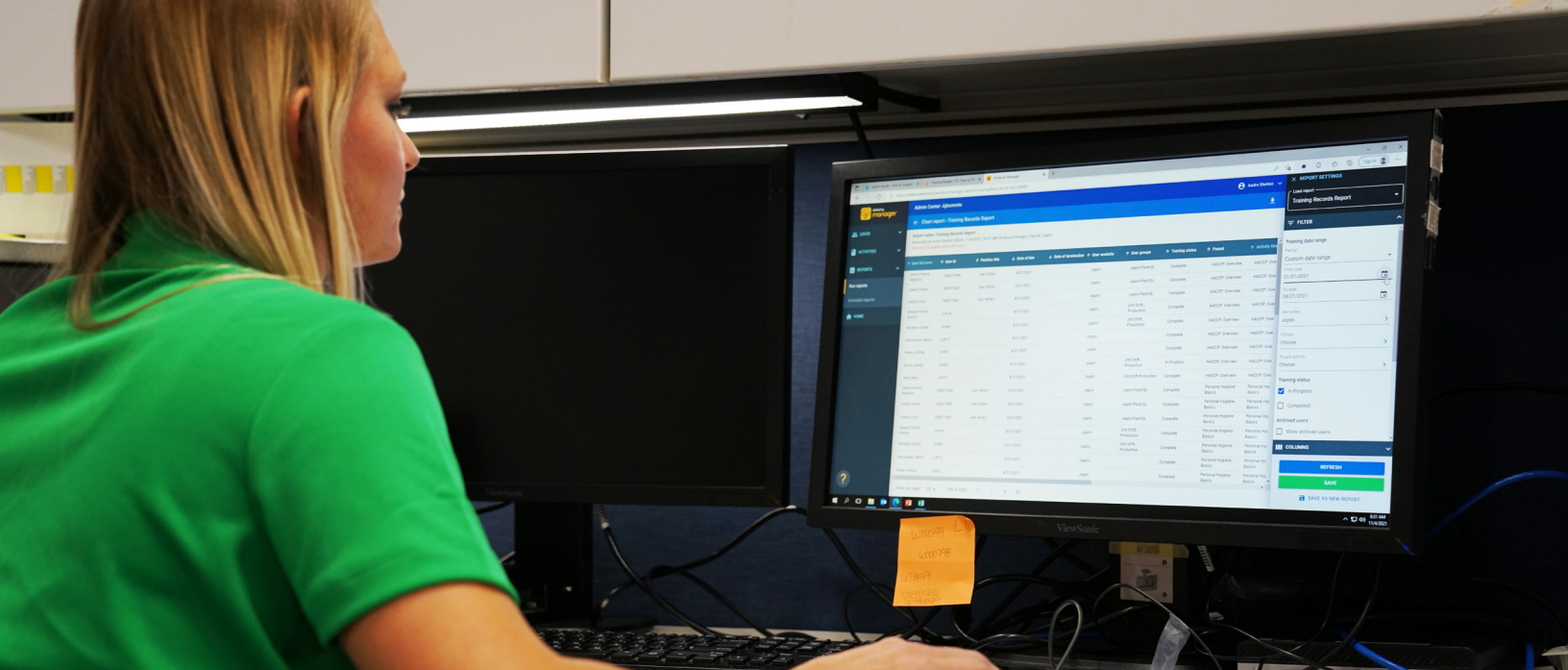
PRO TIP

Utilize a cross-training platform that has qualifications baked into the system.

- Employees can clearly see what they need to accomplish to be qualified for a position or task.

- Leaders can see employees that are in progress toward completing specific cross-training.

- Qualification criteria can be a combo of courses, observations, and documented supervisor sign-off.

- Set whether a qualification expires and when, with automated notifications of upcoming expirations.

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Assigned users

| Qualified (23) | In progress (0) |

Black, Victoria (84480)

Bryan, Arlene (42926)

Campbell, Nichole (76547)

Dean, Benjamin (JSIS776)

Doyle, Cynthia (AIB03480)

Doyle, Ron (3899866)

Franklin, Robin (BB987622)

Monitor and Document for Success

Throughout the process, monitor and document the successes of your program, including employees who have been trained and the effectiveness of your trainers.

Document milestones and feedback. And ensure everyone receives credit for successfully completing their training.

HR will have a clear record of who has completed training — lining them up for potential rewards, promotions or pay raises.

Also, seek feedback from employees on the clarity and effectiveness of your program to continuously improve training.
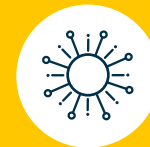
PRO TIP

Make cross-training part of your entire training ecosystem. Onboarding, safety training, regulatory training, and skills development are all important. Ensure they all receive equal measure by keeping all training types in a single, centrally managed platform. Mobile technology is critical for on-the-job cross-training. But it must sync seamlessly with your central LMS and HR systems. This can be an all-in-one platform or separate providers as long as they are cross-compatible.

Set and Monitor Timelines

Training should never be an open-ended process. Set timelines for when certain cross-training programs should be completed. Check with plant managers and HR to determine which employees have completed training and their proficiency. This will be a good time to gather all final feedback from everyone involved — managers, HR, and employees. And use that information to make the next round of training more effective.

Resources to Strengthen Your Cross-training Platform

The next time you stress about labor shortages and hiring challenges, take a moment to look at the talent and resources in front of you. Are you making the most of your current employees? Are they on the verge of leaving for even just a slightly better pay package? Have you created a positive and nurturing work environment that will tell their friends about?

Successful cross-training builds the foundation of a manufacturing program that produces better products and better workers. The time, effort, and investments you place in them will pay off in the long run. Intertek Alchemy is here to help.

Our Training Optimization Consulting team are specialists in training and skills development specific to the manufacturing industry. We can help build the foundation of your program from the ground up or provide a gap assessment based on decades of applied experience.

To round out the tools you'll need, leverage **Alchemy Playbook** — a mobile app that turns any smartphone or tablet into your best cross-training asset. With Alchemy Playbook you can:

- Take photos and videos of workers performing tasks and turn it into an on-the-job training (OTJ) course.

- Cross-train employees on new skills with the task-specific courses, taken right where work is performed.

- Build qualification criteria for specific jobs, and instantly see who is qualified to perform each task.

- Proactively see which jobs need deeper bench strength and track the progress of employees working toward that qualification.

- Integrate all OTJ and cross-training efforts with your central learning management system and compliance training records.

Alchemy Playbook was built specifically for the needs of busy manufacturing facilities. Most Playbook features are fully functional even when no WiFi is available. When connectivity returns, records of newly performed activities are synced to your central reporting platform.

Playbook is especially effective when used with the flagship **Alchemy Enterprise** training platform, which consists of:

- Hundreds of customizable training courses,
- eLearning and interactive group training,
- Coaching and reinforcement tools that validate or remediate behaviors on the floor,
- Airtight reporting and automated record keeping to simplify compliance efforts.

Contact us to schedule time with one of our training consultants to start a cross-training initiative, or to enhance your existing program.

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