

Datastream

And The Show Did Go On

■ *In Spite Of An Over-Worked And Under-Trained Crew, The Facility Opened To Raves*

Well, the show opened on time. The public had no clue that it was practically a bubble gum and duct tape solution. They thought it was great, and the press reviews were outstanding.

The installation and engineering crews pulled at least a dozen rabbits out of their hats in a heroic effort the last week before opening. Yes, we had all of the usual problems. The missing equipment that was on back order showed up the day before the final tech rehearsal, just in time to pull an all-nighter to get the show audio and video loaded and have final timing updated. There is still one piece of equipment on back order, but what can you do? The shipping company is already paying for the equipment that was damaged in transit.

With this particular project, the crew demonstrated a problem plaguing our industry, which really can be avoided. After all, how long can we expect a crew to work 16 to 20 hour shifts without getting burned out, or making those silly mistakes we all make after too long at the same task without sleep? Why did the installation firm not have more people on site?

It does not take a math major to realize that while paying 8 to 10 hours of overtime each day to the same staff can make your staff good money, you may not get the same performance per dollar of pay as when they only work 10 to 12 hours a day. At the rate they were going on this project, though, they could have brought at least three more people on site for what was paid in overtime.

In hindsight the installation company could have worked two teams in 10-hour shifts and gotten a lot more done in the same calendar time for less overall cost.

Why, then, did the installation firm not run double shifts? In the past year, almost every installer that I have spoken with that has come through ICIA's Installation School has had a similar story—too much work to get done, not enough staff to do it. The sales department is doing great; engineering and installation departments are overwhelmed. We all know that we need to make hay when it's sunny, but is there a time when we have enough hay?

The fact is that we need more qualified installation and project engineers in our industry. And it is just not the themed entertainment projects; it's all types of projects. We need to recruit talented people. But where will they come from? It is a dilemma as old as the industry itself, and we have all been asking each other and discussing it throughout the last five years. Do they cross over from a home market background,



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telecommunications, copier repair, or music stores? Just where do they come from?

More troublesome than recruitment is the retention and development of installation technicians. After we find someone that actually knows Ohms law and the difference between resistance and impedance, how do we train them in the ways of our industry and keep them wanting to work? On-the-job training is costly in terms of time and money.

We saw this in our race to get the show open. One of the apprentices was not up to the

place in his career that was needed for the project. It was not that the tech did not try, but due to lack of training, half of his time was spent redoing work that was done incorrectly. And what's worse, these snags only started to show up when the system was rung out.

What scares me the most about this is that when I stepped back and watched what was going on, almost every rule that I teach for was being broken. I understand, of

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course, that exceptions must be made when "our backs are to the wall." In this particular project, for example, we did not have the luxury of testing the system from input to output; it had to be done in sections and

standing of what needs to be done and why it needs to be done. No other industry deals with signals from microvolts to 10's of volts.

We need to know analog, digital, computers, video, and projection. Highly publi-

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when we started programming the show control system we were still debugging the main control program. But this is never a good way to run an installation. Far too often, following "the rules" is the exception because the staff installing the equipment don't know what "the rules" are.

So what is the solution to this industry-wide lack of well-trained technical staff? I think it is time to invest in our industry. We need to take a step back and support the education that has already been provided to our staff. I would suggest that, instead of waiting for the two years of experience that is suggested, new hires be sent to these schools as soon as possible.

Had our young technician on the last project gone to the school he would not have had to redo as many of the connections as he did. Not having an installation crew to run gives me a unique vantage point from which I can see the incredible change that people go through when they go to NSCA's NICET or ICIA's Installation School. The growth and self-confidence of the students that complete these programs is unbelievable. They have a better under-

cized and rigid opening dates dictate our schedules. To make the show work we need to have the staff that put together the vision of the client and designer. Our success is at the mercy of the people the installer has working on our projects. If there is a sufficient pool of qualified installation technicians to draw from, we will not need to live "with our backs against the wall."

The truth is that if we have a well-rested crew with adequate training and support we will have a great install and successful opening. Of course, if we have a burned out crew that cares about their work, we will still have a successful opening—it will just be harder to get there.

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