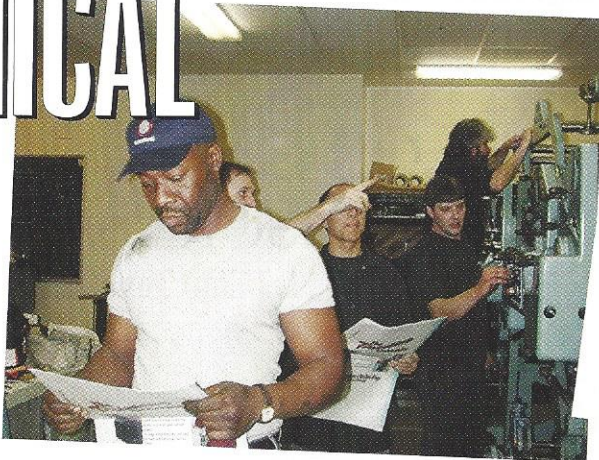


Pressroom operators and managers from six states around the country, and representatives from Goss International and Bowater Inc., join seminar trainers from Goss International and Bob Ray & Associates at West Virginia University Institute of Technology for training and classroom instruction.

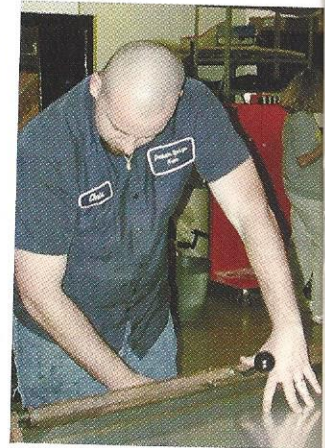
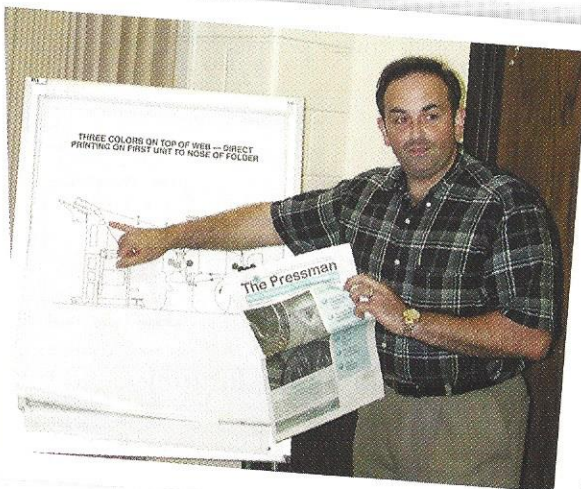
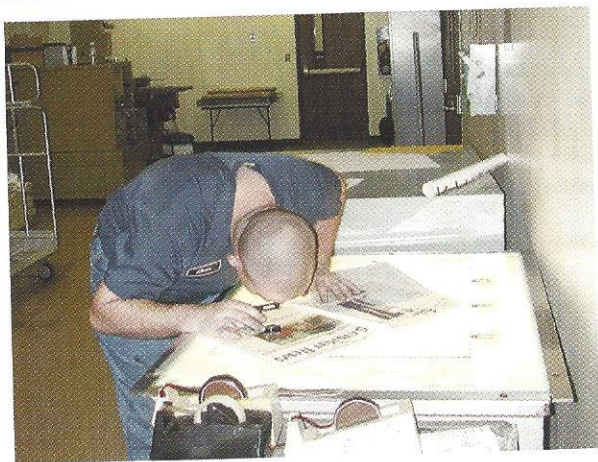


Where SKILLS a

Operations execs
and educators
examine chronic
shortage of qualified
pressroom personnel

BY JIM ROSENBERG

IN THE NINE YEARS SINCE TWO PRODUCTION EXECUTIVES lamented the “practically nil availability of knowledgeable press people” and “an acute shortage of qualified press foremen,” the pool of pressroom and packaging center talent still seems shallow. “Unfortunately, it hasn’t changed much,” says Gannett Manufacturing Director Gary Hughes. “If anything, it may have gotten worse,” with pressroom and mailroom managers “probably the two most difficult positions to fill.”

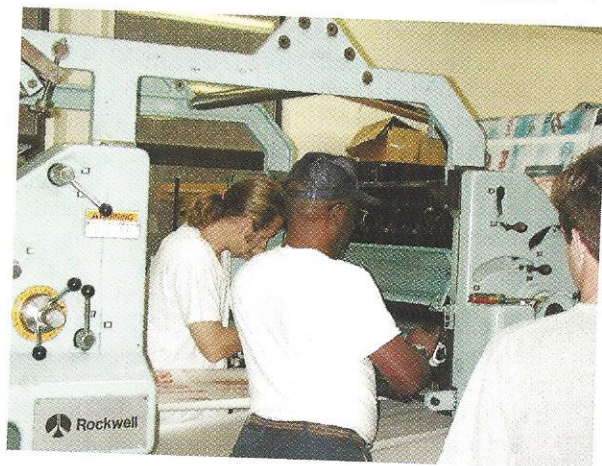
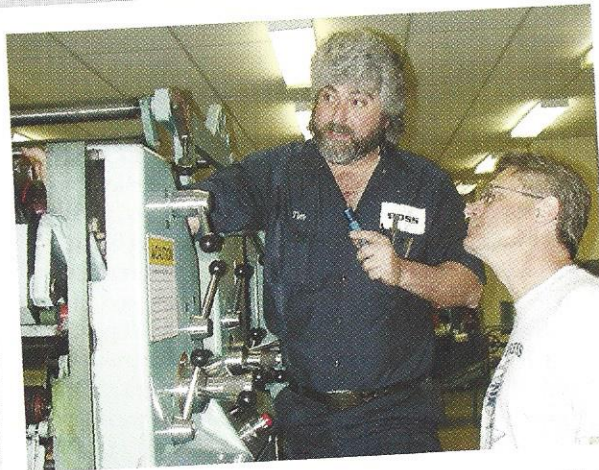
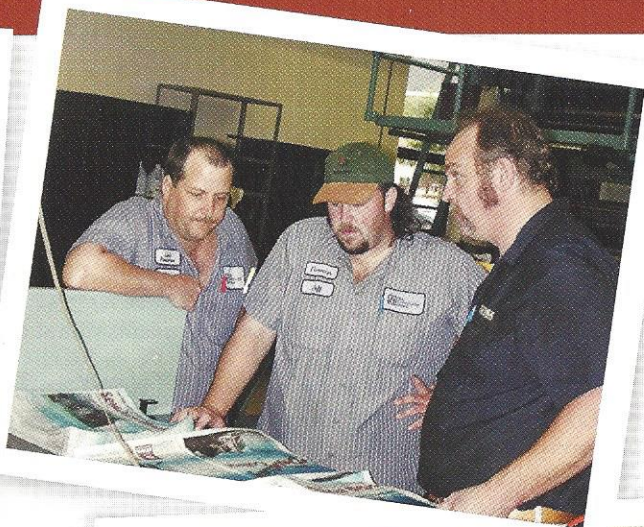


re Scarce

Similar assessments come from all sorts of sites. "Finding qualified pressmen is extremely difficult," says Terry Duck, operations director at the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, where his plant also prints the jointly operated *Las Vegas Sun*. "It's always a tight market for qualified press operators," says *Chicago Tribune* Senior Vice President and General Manager Richard Malone (former group vice president for operations at parent Tribune Publishing Co.). "We've had great difficulty finding people with a number of years' experience," says Gary Blakeley, operations vice president at *The Gazette*, Colorado Springs, Colo., adding that the mailroom is even more in need of capable personnel.

And no one limits the lack to equipment operators. Tom Steck, the *Tribune's* production maintenance manager, complains that "it's been very tough finding experienced help."

Not every newspaper faces this issue. Ray Maly, production director for *The Times-Picayune*, says he has "not experienced it personally" in New Orleans. "We haven't had that big a turnover here," he adds.



But many see a problem that has persisted since the early 1990s. And depending on skills available in the local labor market and the age of a newspaper's equipment, the difficulty may be augmented by quality expectations and technical demands. Some situations may call for more experience and technical know-how from a pool of fewer people.

"The newspaper industry has to promote itself as an industry in need of these people," says consultant Sam Wagner of Web Offset Services, Sarasota, Fla. Ideally, he would like to see it viewed as an "industry in transition" where the pressroom is no longer just a noisy, dirty workplace.

The transition began at least a generation ago: Moving from letterpress to offset lithography in the 1970s meant learning a new process and new press technology,

new quality concerns, and waste issues. At the *Chicago Tribune*, it required the services of an outside trainer. But offset wasn't unknown then, at least not to papers running Goss singlewide and Harris presses. Still, the big old letterpress shops often were noisy and dirty — backshops or basements with sticky floors and an inky mist.

Young and old

The more recent transition, however, is not from one printing process to another, but rather in the technology and design changes in newspaper web offset presses. Probably most significant has been the shift from mechanical to computer press controls — "a huge hurdle for the typical pressman to get over," says Wagner,

a former press operator who went on to work as a technician and trainer at former pressmaker Harris Corp.

While the process remains fundamentally the same for operators, Gannett's Hughes says, what has greatly changed is "the way they go about that process." Whereas a new press won't run without a programmed web path, an older press will, once it's webbed from reel to folder. Changes in required skill sets over the past 10 years have had a parallel effect on the maintenance side. Until recent years, says Hughes, a good mechanical maintenance shop could "keep a press running through thick and thin. Today that requires a staff well trained in electronics."

Moreover, increased capabilities can "add potential for errors," he says. Overall, "it's a

Good post-press workers getting harder to find

IN AN INDUSTRY SYNONYMOUS WITH ITS biggest and costliest machine, it's not surprising that the printing press still gets the most attention when production workers are in short supply.

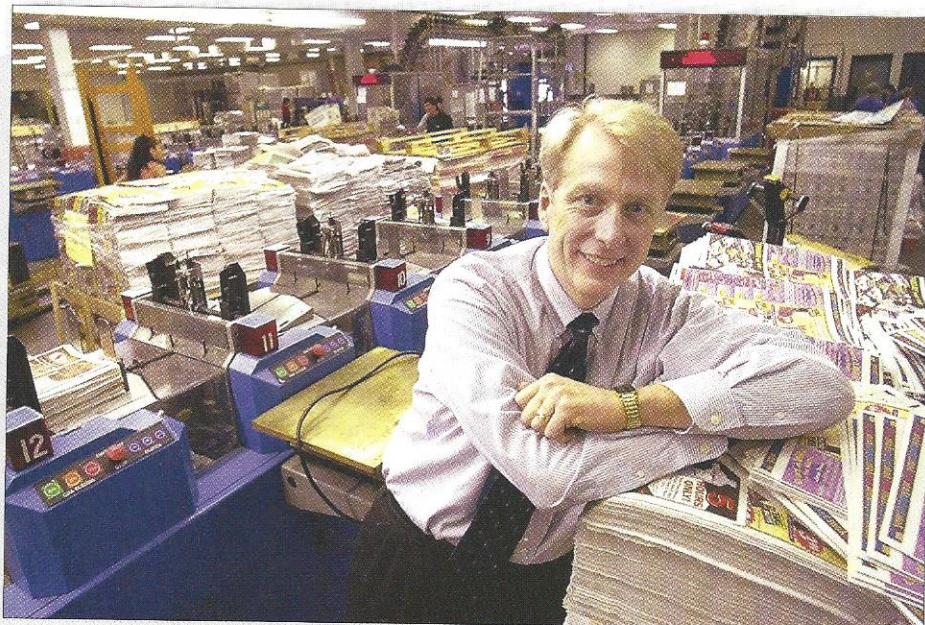
But the importance of the mailroom — its machinery, software, and the amount of revenue for which it is responsible — has increased over the past 20 years. Today, packaging centers, as they are called, have grown in size, volume, and sophistication — even though many of them remain the department hiring the greatest number of least-skilled workers.

Many post-press operations' demands are such that in some areas, a shortage of skilled workers is "actually a worse problem than in the pressroom," says one executive.

The Gazette, in Colorado Springs, Colo., has spent months searching for a lead inserter operator and a second-shift packaging department manager. So far, says Operations Vice President Gary Blakeley, "We have been fairly unsuccessful."

Speaking about an environment where the numbers of products and their physical characteristics are always changing, placing different demands on staff and systems, Blakeley says, "I still believe that packaging is a much more complex operation."

Not unlike other departments, as the



Operations Vice President Gary Blakeley in *The Gazette's* packaging area, Colorado Springs, Colo.

equipment and its controls became more complex and more automated, some mailroom jobs were lost. Those that remained often required greater technical skill to properly maintain the machines, and greater operating skill to exploit new systems' capabilities. Efforts to find and train the right people didn't always keep pace.

"We don't spend enough time focused on that right now," says Blakeley, citing the attention to the pressroom. Upper management at his 97,791-circulation (114,450 Sunday) Freedom Communications daily has asked him to focus on it, but he says he's unaware of a comparable level of concern elsewhere.

The Gazette likely will become a GMA beta site for training — not only for the equipment, but also for management, ac-

cording to Blakeley, who asks, "how do we become better leaders in the mailroom?"

And where such persons are employed, he says, they are usually treated well and reluctant to leave.

Blakeley has been arranging for a lead operator and two mailroom mechanics to attend GMA-conducted training sessions this month. He expects to send another three people from packaging at the end of summer, then arrange for training a packaging center manager.

A believer in machine-specific training, Blakeley says that because newspapers too often don't pay for such maintenance and operator training when they purchase new equipment, "We pay for it on the back end, because we lose efficiency."

— Jim Rosenberg

huge learning curve for the individuals," one that requires a "huge" amount of training.

But by the mid-'90s, as computers became common in homes, Wagner notes, personnel became more comfortable making the transition to a software-controlled environment — even though the press-side or quiet room console may be different from their own personal computers.

Still, he adds, that hasn't always been true of older, retiring pressroom foremen or superintendents, who may not have used home PCs or presses with PLCs.

Hughes says younger operators are generally "not as intimidated" by computer screens and mice, while older ones with good skills may cling to switches, wheels, knobs, levers, and dials. For all their knowledge and experience, "older press operators," he adds, "aren't necessarily the ones who are most capable today."

Even where that is true, however, two things are worth remembering: The first is that there is little incentive for a supervisor or senior operator to learn new tricks, if he or she is close to retirement. But even when that is the case, Hughes points out, the second thing to keep in mind is that during an upgrade or new-plant project, some or

all of the old presses still need to run. So, to assist in that transition, older workers often remain "a tremendously needed asset," he says. "We've actually brought people out of retirement" to run older presses while younger staffers are trained on new equipment, says Hughes.

When the *Chicago Tribune* undertook its recent major enhancement to packaging operations, it asked one accomplished project manager with engineering capabilities to come back on a consulting basis, Malone says.

Another scenario: senior people stay on the job longer, solely to groom their successors. In some cases, it may mean persuading and investing in them to train on new equipment that they'll oversee or operate only for a couple of years. Says one print production educator, "Some of them may be honored."

Chances of error reduced

At the same time, Wagner maintains that typical newspaper plants don't have technicians able to deal with digital control or drive systems. "You need almost a person at the programming level" — not a programmer, he says, but someone who can troubleshoot with confidence. "In a very

short time you realize how critical that is," he adds, for a new or upgraded press with digital drives, controls, or inkers.

But while technical complexity may increase the opportunity for error, some maintain that once new systems are learned, chances of error diminish. Even as quality demands rise and equipment becomes more sophisticated, operators' jobs have "gotten easier because of the electronics," says the *Las Vegas Review-Journal's* Duck. Although understanding the process remains a given, computers can handle much of what earlier had been expected of operators. A press crew, Duck says, needs to "understand the concept and then just work within what the computer will allow them to do."

Wagner says new presses remove much of printing's "black art," and adds that "a lot of these things now are cut and dry." He calls the latest presses "manufacturing machines" on which manual adjustment has given way to computer presetting.

If few experienced pressroom people are available in many markets, at least the technology reduces the number of operators required. According to Wagner, "Now you can basically take the cream of the crop."

The same technology, however, had been



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Las Vegas Review-Journal Operations Director Terry Duck

changing maintenance requirements, with an emphasis on electronics. And while mechanical settings, for example, are no more difficult — perhaps even easier — Duck claims that just having more couples and more color means more work. While printing may be getting closer to asking operators to “just babysit the press,” he concludes, “what really makes that press run is proper maintenance.”

His Las Vegas pressroom counts 61 employees: 41 pressmen of various capability levels (nine are foremen); 13 in maintenance (six mechanical and seven electrical, including two working supervisors); four custodial, primarily for cleaning floors, presses, etc.; and three paperhandlers. They produce the two dailies' average weekday circulation of 207,178 and 18 other weekly newspaper-related jobs on two eight-tower Goss Newsline presses, with shaftless drives and keyless inkers, and an eight-unit Goss Community.

Duck, who also has consulting responsibilities for parent Stephens Media Group's other dailies, says that at smaller operations, “there's a bigger demand on the people you hire” for both operating and maintenance skills. “In the smaller operation, the average guy does have to know more,” he says, and when a small site acquires new equipment, it may require doing less but knowing more.

However, because most Stephens sites still run presses that are about 30 years old, changing skills are not yet an issue.

Wagner suggests that sites with fairly new but not cutting-edge equipment can rely on one key production staffer to keep a competent press crew within sound operating parameters. With many pressrooms having less-skilled crews than in the past, he continues, operations of modest size can depend on that one person possessing the required knowledge, rather than trying to train everyone to a higher level.

Training in-house

Though the industry alone isn't supplying the numbers it needs, identifying and training existing employees remains the common, even preferred, pressroom source.

Like so many other newspapers over the years, the typical progression at *The Orange County* (Calif.) *Register* was

from mailroom to reelroom to pressroom. Newspapers often “don't realize that the best [workers] are the ones you train yourself,” says Freedom Communications Inc. Corporate Affairs Vice President Richard A. Wallace. But having spent 18 of his 42 years with Freedom as general manager of its flagship *Register*, in Santa Ana, Wallace warns against allowing “one pressman to teach another, because it's mostly the bad habits that get transferred.” Technical information, available from a paper's ink, plate, and other vendors, is the easy part, he says, in contrast with the work ethic, which comes from the worker and the workplace.

At the *Times-Picayune*, Maly cites much success with packaging department staffers. Wherever the source, he looks for good mechanical skills and work habits and the desire to learn. His experience “training from the inside” and advancing people over time has yielded “more success ... than in bringing people in from the outside.” And his paper tries to immunize itself against chronic personnel problems by also focusing on retaining the people it trains and promotes by striving to be a good place to work.

But if newspapers often don't realize the benefits of cultivating staffers with potential,

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those in-house candidates themselves sometimes "don't realize they have the talent" to manage, Wallace says. From supervisor on up, interpersonal skills are more important and more difficult to impart than technical information or skills that can be acquired or improved with in-house training.

Whether promoted or hired for the job, anyone assigned to operate equipment needs some in-house training to reach a satisfactory performance level, says Blakeley. Even with the core skills that a staffer can carry over from one site or machine to another, knowing how to run or maintain one piece of equipment won't always

translate to another. Machine-specific training is a must.

The Vegas notion

An "experiment" in the mid-'90s led the *Review-Journal* to advertise across the country to fill pressroom positions. "Typically, we were ending up hiring someone else's culls," Duck recalls, referring to those eager to leave jobs elsewhere for other than satisfactory reasons. Recruiting from vocational-technical schools never panned out. "Since then," he says, "we have started growing our own."

From ads in the *R-J* and *Sun*, he explains, "we hire local. We give them a

mechanical-aptitude test." If they pass, they are entered in a training program. Ordinarily, Duck says, "we don't have a lot of turnover in our supervisory positions." And when there are openings, they are filled by staffers who are ready to advance.

Similarly, the *Chicago Tribune*, which tries "to source from the inside" but also looks outside to fill pressroom posts, prefers to promote people into supervisory roles rather than hire, says Malone. In many cases, such staffers already have filled in for supervisors on vacation.

Because most pressroom change is incremental, says Malone, "we just do some add-on training for the folks we have." When new equipment is installed, "it's equally challenging to the operators and the maintenance staff." But because obsolete or worn-out gear is usually replaced, repairs are few and parts easy to come by.

Las Vegas is the only Stephens site with a training program. Crews at its other papers learn on the job. Though not familiar with every site, Duck says, "it's been difficult to find good people in some of our operations." Some, he adds, had success finding people willing to relocate from one Stephens paper to fill an opening at another.

If the attractive locale of Colorado Springs is scratching for capable press and inserter operators, and ever-growing Clark County can't always find suitable applicants, imagine having a hard time filling a management slot in Hawaii. Gannett has been advertising for someone able to handle a plant project, new presses, and labor issues for "a large pressroom position open now in Honolulu," says Hughes. But even at that level, the experience resembles Duck's. "We've actually even gone through some headhunters," Hughes says. "That was rare in the past." Ads worked to fill a pre-press opening, he says, but "advertising ... hasn't been the most successful route."

Gannett usually promotes from within a newspaper or the company. Today, among other things, "people are not as eager to relocate," Hughes says, adding that there's no point in pushing unwilling people.

So, like everyone else, Gannett still follows a "grow-your-own" approach. Until it ended in 1994, *USA Today's* production coordinator program "was a tremendous training ground," mostly for production-management graduates. They kept the new national daily shipshape in all shops and seeded Gannett with future leaders — including Hughes himself and Mark Mikolajczyk, recently promoted to Gannett senior vice president of operations.

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now, but "on a smaller scale," says Hughes, it "established some regional [group] training" to groom likely candidates for future openings at higher levels (in addition to some training at individual newspapers). Also, executives across the country identify potential future managers and submit their names to the Production Leadership Training program, which aims to improve skills among the candidates it selects.

Monthly meetings at Gannett corporate provide a "snapshot" of the status of various operations, including where there are openings and who may be available to fill them.

Individual papers, however, generally recruit and train their own personnel. The

Chicago Tribune found it was spending more time developing its apprenticeship program, according to Malone. Relying on internal postings, the program screens applications. Applicants are interviewed and their past performance, aptitude, skills, and level of interest in pursuing certain work are evaluated.

Maintenance needed

Apprenticeships also are more important than ever on the maintenance side, where "it has gotten a lot more technical, and you require a lot more skills than in the past," says the *Tribune's* Steck. As equipment became technically more sophisticated, the



Gary Hughes, manufacturing director, Gannett Co.

paper hasn't needed to fill some positions, he says, adding that in an uncertain economy, jobs that are filled tend to stay filled.

"The last three or four years we've had pretty good stability," says Steck. But when the trades are doing well, "people have a

choice." That may mean, for example, that night work seems a lot less appealing to new hires when good jobs turn up elsewhere.

Steck remembers a time when newspapers usually could count on finding vendor service technicians who had tired of life on the road. "It was pretty easy to get experienced people," he said. But that seemed to end at least 10 years ago: "Today, we just don't seem to see that."

So electrical apprentices spend four days a week at work, and the fifth day at a technical school. "They have to get a two-year degree," says Steck, who notes that although an apprentice program exists for machinists, "we haven't needed it for a while."

Learning doesn't end with an apprenticeship. Production and packaging changes call for more training. In the last 18 months, Steck notes, the *Tribune* provided mechanics and electricians with more than 6,000 hours of training "on all the new equipment that we purchased," he said, most of it in a new packaging center.

At Freedom, Wallace mentions that it can be easier finding good maintenance personnel who have trained in other industries.

Steck, too, says the *Tribune* trains some who come from other industries. To find or attract maintenance personnel, "I think we've done just about everything," he says, including advertising and visiting technical schools.

The military supplies training in electronic controls that are similar to those now used in pressrooms. The large military presence near Las Vegas provides the *R-J* with a pool of retired personnel with the requisite skills, but "they, too, have to pass a mechanical-aptitude test," even though their specialty is electrical, according to Duck. For one thing, he says, the test gives some indication of certain logical capabilities. For another, "all our electrical people do mechanical [work]," he says, "but none of our mechanical [staff] does electrical."

Of course, the best place to find qualified newspaper press operators, foremen,

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machinists, and electricians is a newspaper, but Malone says "you don't see a lot of poaching," which he attributes to newspapers' traditionally "collegial relationship." When relying on friendly relationships for information or help in an emergency, "it's rare for that to happen," he says.

"I don't think there's any deliberate poaching, but it may happen inadvertently," says Blakeley. About as close as he's come was when a counterpart at an eastern newspaper was looking for a mailroom manager. Blakeley said he sought some of those who hadn't taken the job, in hopes of finding a suitable candidate who might prefer working in Colorado.

There's inadvertent, and there's indirect. Apart from looking within the big Gannett organization itself, "networking is probably the number-one way we've been able to find and secure people," says Hughes. That includes talking to vendors, whose widely traveled representatives get to know many people at different newspapers.

Back to schools

And the work force in commercial printing? First, it may be limited to looking at web offset lithography — not sheetfed or gravure presses, possibly not even heatset offset (with its extra equipment and different inks and paper stocks), or narrow-web

and package-printing flexo operations (with equipment and consumables different from those found in newspaper flexography). Second, it depends on the number of shops in a market, according to Hughes.

Gannett probably knows more than any other newspaper group about commercial work. It has an entire division dedicated to the business, not merely the non-newspaper "semi-commercial" work that some publishers manage to profitably occupy their presses' otherwise idle hours.

With the similarity of the commercial plants' equipment (and many of their products) to that in newspaper pressrooms, "there's been some relocation of people from Gannett Offset facilities to newspapers, and the other way around," Hughes says, pointing to the similarity of skills sets (Gannett doesn't run heatset). Still, he says, the fact remains that the commercial side also sometimes struggles to secure talent.

"We certainly talk to the schools," says Hughes, noting that four or five universities have especially well-known graphic arts programs.

Gannett looks to the four-year schools for future managers, who while students must first move through internships and mentoring programs that bring on-the-job experience and, eventually, exposure to many areas. "It's difficult to gain the respect of the people you're managing if you're not capable of understanding exactly what their job functions are," says Hughes.

Though he hasn't hired such graduates, Duck sees training in everything from print theory to press operation and maintenance, as "a good vehicle" for moving qualified people into the industry.

The *Tribune* has three or four graduates of the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), including Malone, who says another three or four work elsewhere in Tribune Co. They and employees from other schools "tend to have a flatter learning curve," he says, but they start not in line production jobs but in analysis, quality assurance, and support positions before moving into supervision and management. One intern from nearby Northwestern University came back as an industrial engineer, working in the new packaging operation.

Prepare for the future

"We're not educating students to run presses," says Harvey R. Levenson, head of California Polytechnic State University's Graphic Communications Department. Nevertheless, future managers do learn press operation and troubleshooting at the San Luis Obispo school, which recently

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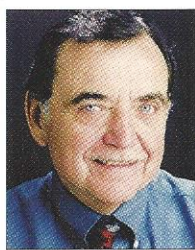
opened the Goss International Printing Laboratory.

Its *Daily Mustang* is likely the only college daily entirely produced by students, from news gathering and ad sales through printing and distribution. Besides commercial printing, graphic arts software development, and equipment manufacturing, Cal Poly graduates work at big California dailies and various print sites for Gannett and *The Wall Street Journal*.

As for a shortage of trained operators, Levenson says "there are fewer trade schools [and] I don't think the union schools are doing anything in this area these days." As operators' numbers dwindled, he says, so did the pool of experienced candidates to replace retiring foremen. As for maintenance, he points to more complex equipment "requiring manufacturer service."

So, if grow-your-own remains the industry's principal option, Levenson says that to help recruit "good, competent technical people who can learn quickly," more tests are now available for determining candidates best suited for areas like printing.

But finding and hiring recruits is one thing; training them is another. American



Robert Hacker, RIT professor emeritus

and European apprenticeships range from four to six years, but compared with training in Europe, "the U.S. stinks," says consultant Robert G. Hacker, who until 1998 was a professor of newspaper operations at RIT. Calling it "a sad situation," he says new hires at papers in this country are often left to do little more than "walk around and watch what the pressmen are doing," hoping "they'll be kind enough" to explain the job.

In contrast, the European approach sounds more like *Tribune* training for maintenance techs: a minimum of four days per week in the pressroom and attendance at school studying theory, learning how the equipment and process work, and "how the pieces interact with one another," says Hacker.

RIT's Print Media School (which just dedicated its Heidelberg Web Press Laboratory) once offered programs for working pressmen. "Attendance was so low," Hacker recalls, "they had to terminate it."

Not so many years ago, according to Hacker, publishers were not always prepared to pay for training, even after investing so much in new printing equipment. But Jack W. Nuckols, Printing Technology Department chairman at the West Virginia University Institute of Technology, doesn't see that problem. When buying new equipment, he says, "they generally invest in the training."

In addition to adequately training a new generation of press operators, the industry can re-train existing workers unfamiliar with (or even uninterested in understanding) things like ink-water balance — where an operator may increase the ink, run to the folder to check results before they've taken effect, return and increase the ink some more, and readjust for over-inking. "It's like a yo-yo," Hacker says. "Patience is a difficult thing to teach."

But he insists it is possible by gaining operators' confidence. "They will benefit because life will become easier — they won't have to fight the battle so hard," he says. "They're willing to do it because they see improvements ... If you just beat them up, nobody's going to do anything."

In this respect, Hacker points to the

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"complete turn-around" at the formerly letterpress *Chicago Sun-Times*, under new production chief Barry Mechanic. Hacker consulted and "coached" at the paper, which he said identified promising pressmen and "gave them an opportunity to progress and grow," an approach now being extended to prepress imaging.

Needs met in West Virginia

Established in the late 1980s, West Virginia's newspaper program offers both four-year management and two-year operators' programs. "I probably get at least two to four inquiries a month, in some cases a couple of times a week" from people searching for production professionals, Nuckols says. "It seems like everyone is just desperate for help."

Goss donated a Community press, erected in 1989, and, in the '90s, a traded-in Community tower. The latter was rebuilt by Mountain States, rewired by Masthead International, supplied with blankets (through help from *The Cincinnati Enquirer's* production vice president, David E. Preisser), plates and platemakers from Western Lithotech, paper from Bowater, and inks from US Ink and Flint Ink. More recently, Cox Newspapers Operations Vice President Stanley P. Richmond arranged a donation of mailroom equipment. The department also has a small flexo press and is involved with newspapers' flexo user group.

The department is trying to raise approximately \$4 million for a National Publishing Innovation Center that will encompass more industry training, better student education, and applied research for vendors.

For now, industry training consisting of four-day, hands-on sessions is moving from two to four times a year to satisfy "a



Press Operations Manager Fred White and students with RIT's new Heidelberg Sunday press

tremendous need" for basic training, says Nuckols. Paper and ink companies also send employees, and even publishers of small papers occasionally attend to ensure that their papers can always be printed. Nuckols also would like to establish ongoing training in basics that would allow young new operators to "hit the ground running."

To retain capable people, Nuckols suggests that for some publishers, rather than searching widely for an experienced operator, "if you identify [someone] from your local area and send them off for training, you have a better chance of them staying."

From among its students, the school this summer is sending four interns to *The Washington Post* and to E.W. Scripps dailies in Memphis, Tenn., Abilene, Texas,

and Henderson, Ky. Scripps Howard Supply President Sharon Hite chairs the school's Newspaper Operations Advisory Committee — a who's who of industry executives.

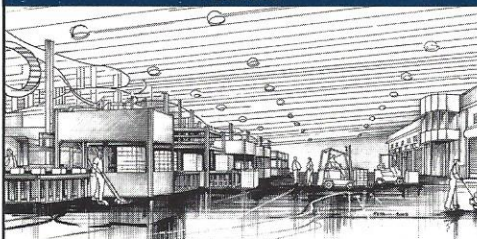
Industry commitment and the work of these and other schools — from the best-known four-year institutions, to countless two-year technical and vocational colleges around the country — as well as the work of industry-specific programs (such as the Newspaper Production & Research Center in Oklahoma City), all play a part in keeping presses rolling and papers looking sharp.

But the challenges start outside the pressrooms and classrooms. As Nuckols says, "It helps to get students interested early in the newspaper industry." ■

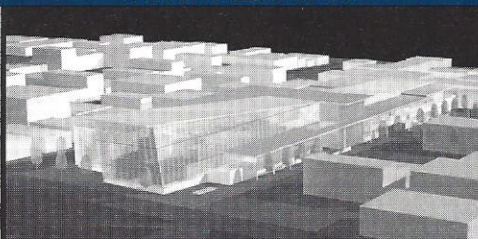
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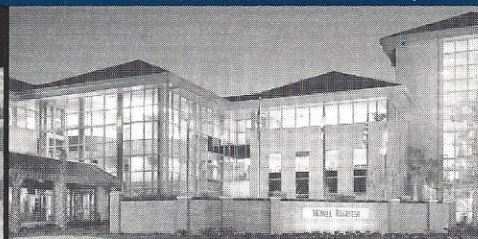
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