



By Dawn Burcham, CPP

# Addressing the Engineer Shortage: Help Introduce Packaging Careers to Young People

My colleagues and I have been talking about the lack of young individuals wanting to work on the factory floor. Many companies are concerned with the lack of available workers. To fill the void, they have had to encourage personnel who are ready to retire to stay longer.

Coincidentally, we were also discussing how we can't find younger bowlers and dart players. One gentleman indicated their league may fold because they can't find players. That got me to thinking that the worlds of work and pleasure have unexpectedly collided. I promise to connect the dots in a moment.

We have forgotten to teach our children that not everyone is meant to go to college. Working a trade from the ground up is lucrative, rewarding, fulfilling, and honorable. Young laborers make money, may buy a good car, take vacation, and move out on their own. Having disposable cash in your late teens and early 20s is unique today, unless you are born to affluence. We also hear stories of how college graduates have staggering debt the moment they finish school and can't find work in their chosen field. They feel defeated and frustrated. I am not saying college is bad or not worth the money. I am saying not every student is meant to go to college. A college education should be an option rather than an expectation.

## Parallel paths

What does this have to do with joining a bowling or dart league? League play requires an extended time commitment.

Today, young folks find their social release through online games and don't feel the need to go out. This is where the two segments I've been referring to, working in a factory and joining a recreational league, face a similar lack of interest. How do they get the attention and passion of the younger generations? One answer is to make introductions.

We need to introduce our respective industries and pastimes to very young people. Here is a good example: Several of my company's temporary workforce packaging specialists began in other engineering disciplines. They learned about packaging through their university, fliers, professors, and/or other students. They changed majors and they've been happy in packaging ever since.

Through my years of working in grade, middle, and high schools, I have learned that faculty do not know the packaging engineer career

exists (unless you live in a paper mill town). When I share the different aspects, roles, and opportunities of a packaging career, students become engaged. The same happens for less common sports such as lacrosse, crewing, bowling, or darts. We all need to figure out how to introduce manufacturing careers into the middle school years along with STEM programs, which now focus on 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. Some programs start in elementary school.

## Club activities

How do they do this? They start with game club and Lego club, and they have healthy competitions that make learning fun. Moderators begin sharing with students how math, engineering, and science affect their clubs. Next, we have Girls in STEM and robotics clubs. Industry and institutions of higher learning begin to have

influence by preparing special events for these clubs. Next are fun events in high school such as egg drop and corrugated boat contests (they build a boat from corrugated and try to row the length of a swimming pool) and advanced robotics competitions. The STEM community has begun showing us solutions to worker scarcity with its introduction to educators, parents, and ultimately, students, including many who have participated in the egg drop and corrugated boat competitions. We need to build on this beginning and expand these programs to other cities.

We need paper professionals to connect these dots and add more. Our challenge,

moving forward, is to identify and reach out to influencers: educators, associations (Student Toastmasters, Rotary Clubs, ROTC), coaches, and parents. We need to share with these influencers what we do for a living. We need face time with data and examples.

I know knowledge-sharing works because every year I spend time in high schools introducing packaging to students.

Our organizations must invest in packaging champions—those who make it their full-time role to visit schools and organizations to introduce and promote packaging, to bring it to life. My challenge to our organizations is to find and pay an industry champion. I also challenge each of you to be personally involved: Introduce yourself to young people and volunteer. And then watch their world and yours expand. **PW**

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The author, Dawn Burcham, is an IoPP Certified Packaging Professional and PPM Packaging Lead at GE Lighting.

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