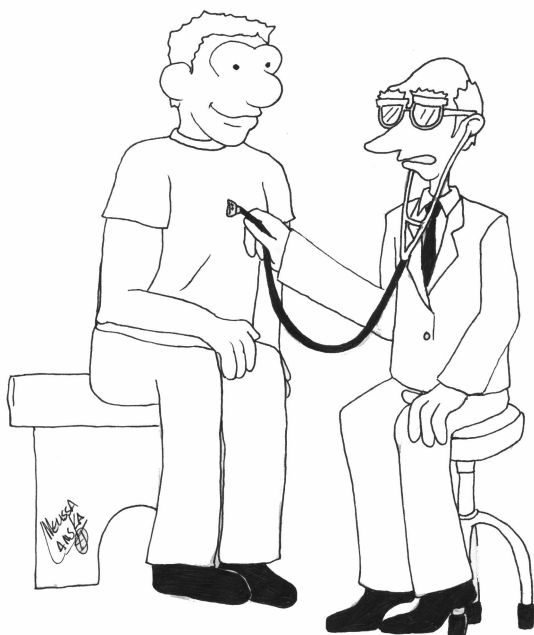


# The Press Helper



*"Let me check your qualifications. OK, you're hired!"*

*Challenging management philosophy in flexo print shops.*

**By David J. Lanska**

**Illustrations by Melissa Lanska**

**M**ost printing industry articles, speeches and books deal with technical aspects of flexographic printing and focus on specific components in the ink train. There is no question that these are important issues for printers. They affect process capabilities and process efficiencies. However, in all these discussions of inks and plates, dies and anilox rolls, there is something notably missing. One of the least discussed and arguably most important issues affecting profitability is how managers "manage" the employees, and particularly those in the lowest positions in the organization.

Who is the lowest person on the food chain at most print shops? Usually, it is the press helper, the lowest paid position with the highest turnover. The press helper performs a wide range of important jobs. Depending on the company, the helper's tasks can include supplying rotary dies, anilox rolls, plate cylinders, inks and roll stock to the press operator; cleaning anilox rolls and other parts, and returning them to their appropriate home when the job is finished.

It is a dirty, noisy entry level job that often requires heavy lifting. It is a tough position to fill and to keep filled. Sometimes, in the struggle to replace employees, the manager might get so frustrated that he or she considers an applicant "qualified" simply because they have a pulse.

What happens if press helpers are conscientious and do their jobs well? Don't they usually get quickly promoted, perhaps to press operator, leaving you with yet another opening in the cleaning room?

Now consider what happens if they don't perform well. They either quit after a short period of time (again leaving the position vacant), or you are stuck with a person who does a poor job, leaves press components dirty or doesn't clean them thoroughly, handles them carelessly, and ends up damaging them. Isn't it ironic that the person whom you pay the least might possibly have the largest impact on your productivity and profitability?

That is a bold statement, but think about it. What happens, for example, if anilox rolls are not cleaned thoroughly?

- Ink hardens in the cells making them much more difficult to clean;
- a simple, five-minute clean takes a half hour or more;
- corners get cut on procedures designed to protect the rolls;
- cell walls get hammered from repeated cleaning cycles and begin to deteriorate;
- color matching becomes more difficult and unpredictable;
- press operators have to change out anilox rolls they have just installed or 'tweak' the system – playing with the ink, blade pressure or impression (any of which could result in ill effects to print quality or damage to other press components);
- makeready times get extended and productivity suffers;
- waste goes up as press efficiency plummets;

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- precious raw materials become waste materials; and
- print quality suffers as press operators are forced to settle for less than optimum results.

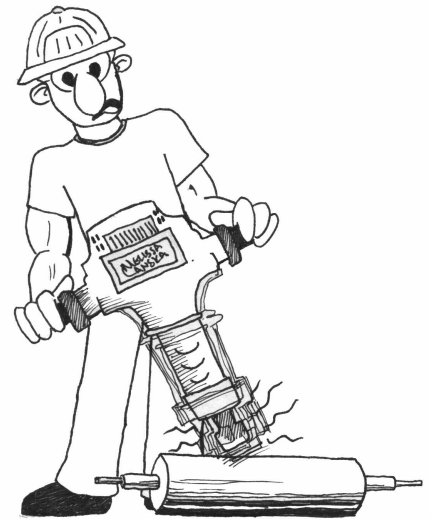
Not only does poor workmanship in the “cleaning” room affect the condition of the rolls and other components, it affects their useful service life and their performance. It also has ramifications on the productivity of the press operators and the quality of the print.

Because the press helper position seems to always have high turnover, we often find shortcuts in their training. It seems hard to justify putting a lot of effort into training someone if you don’t know whether or not they will work out and stay. Yet in one day on the job, an ill-trained press helper can damage several anilox rolls, leave others plugged, and cause ripple effects of reduced productivity for months, possibly longer, throughout the pressroom.

If careless press helpers damage only one anilox roll per week, that still means 52 damaged rolls per year. The cost of resurfacing that many rolls can approach \$50,000, and that figure does not include shipping costs and loss of productivity while rolls are sent out. By the same token, carelessness in plate mounting results in poor registration, plate distortion and added costs for plate replacement, as well as extended makereadies, wasted raw materials and reduced print quality.

Now consider the ink tenders, who monitor pH and viscosity and make adjustments to the ink formulation. If this function is performed improperly, especially during a long print run, the ink goes out of balance affecting ink flow and drying characteristics. The ink begins to dry on the anilox rolls and plates. Print quality and ink densities drop. The shift may be gradual and result in roll after roll of waste being generated before the problem is noticed and addressed.

Once detected, the press has to be shut down, the print station drained of ink, the blade holder, plate cylinder and



the anilox wiped down, removed and cleaned. The print station has to be reassembled and color match reestablished.

Of course, if you put a clean anilox in a print station with watered down ink, the color is not going to come up. So then the press operator starts adjusting impression and doctor blade pressure to compensate. These serve only to cause unnecessary deterioration of the plates, premature blade wear, and negative effects on print quality (haloing, increased dot gain and muddy print).

Next the operator might try a different anilox to bring up more color. If that doesn’t work, she might go back to the ink room to have the ink beefed up. Now she’s over-inking the damaged highlight dots and has to wait for hours for new plates to be processed. All this time, the press is down or producing scrap. How much downtime and process waste could have been avoided if the ink tender regularly checked the ink and made small adjustments to keep it in balance?

Perhaps, rather than treating press helpers as non-skilled employees, it would be better to redefine the position and perhaps elevate it. In *The Complete Idiot’s Guide To Managing People* (Alpha Books, 1995, page 214), Arthur Pell suggests making dull jobs more worker-friendly by “redesigning these jobs”, “enlarging their scope” and “redesigning the manner in which the job is performed”. By framing this position as more of a technician and liaison between production and quality assurance, the position can take on new meaning and importance. The person who “manages” the roll inventory, monitors the ink and mounts the plates now has a pivotal role in the efficiency of the pressroom, in the quality of the product, and ultimately in the success of the company.

Yes, it might mean paying more money in wages. Yes, it could also mean spending more time and money training those individuals, perhaps even sending them to a beginner flexography course. Instead of focusing on those costs, I suggest that you think of the savings you would realize from:

- reduced anilox roll resurfacing;
- reduced plate costs;



**“Didn’t we do a great job printing this dachshund?”**  
**“Um, I think you may have stretched the plates.**  
**It was supposed to be a chihuahua.”**

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- reduced oddball ink returned to the shelves of your ink room;
- reduced raw material costs for substrates that would otherwise end up in the trash; and
- reduced cleaning consumables and waste disposal costs.

If you look at strictly anilox resurfacing costs, you probably spend thousands of dollars each year because of incidental damage. What if you could cut those costs by 50 percent? How much money would that free up? Would you consider a little more emphasis on training and employee retention a good investment to achieve those results?

Think about the productivity you would gain if you reduced your average makeready times. In a large operation, you might add enough capacity to bring on new business without adding a new press. That could free up cash to invest in added capabilities, improved quality control equipment, additional anilox inventory or new plate technologies.

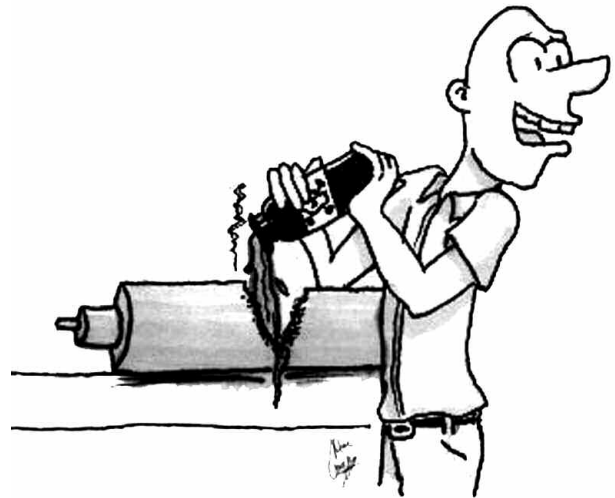
You could argue that the turnover in the press helper's position is too high to justify the investment in training. That might be true, but ask yourself why you have that turnover. How is the job portrayed in your shop? How was it presented in your want ad? What kind of growth opportunities are there for those who do well in the position? My guess is that it was presented as an entry level job that someday could lead to a press operator's position. If that's the case, were you really looking for someone to take care of your anilox rolls for the long term? If the job is presented as a stepping stone, you can bet it will be stepped on.

In many small companies, the owner is out in the press-room mounting plates, setting up print jobs and cleaning up the press components at the end of the run. It is obviously not beneath his dignity to perform those tasks because his livelihood depends on the performance of the equipment. Instead, he takes pride in the quality he turns out (even with an old rattletrap press). Often, his business grows and prospers because of his attitude and work ethic. The company buys newer presses, adds people and continues to grow.

In the most successful companies, the work ethic that started with the owner is translated through to all of the employees. The customer is king and everything revolves around beating the customer's needs and expectations. I hope you note that I did not say "meeting customer expectations". If your goal is to meet customer expectations, what happens if you fall short?

People with true customer focus do more than the minimum. I can't stress enough that in today's competitive environment, meeting customer expectations is doing the minimum. Those who strive to beat customer expectations can be assured that if they fall short, they will have done nothing less than what the customer expects. In successful companies, customer focus permeates the organization right down to the press helpers.

The question is, "How do you get those in the entry level positions to buy in?" While this could be the basis for an



*"This really cleans well."*

entire book in itself, some important elements of any job at any level of the organization include:

- challenge and room for job growth;
- an understanding of the job duties;
- respect and value for opinions and ideas; and
- recognition and reward for initiative.

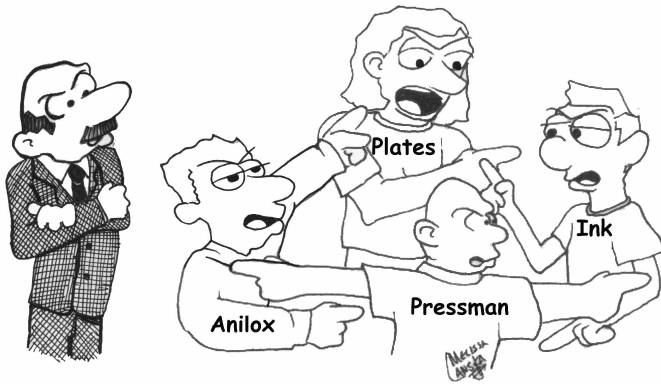
Before you say you can't afford raises, understand that recognition doesn't always mean promotion, and rewards do not always mean money. A pizza party can be a good way to reward employees for meeting productivity goals or breaking safety records. Bringing in donuts is a nice thank-you for employees who volunteered for overtime. Putting a write-up on the bulletin board or in a company newsletter is a great way to recognize a successful improvement initiative. Allocating proceeds from recycling efforts to be used for door prizes at a company picnic or holiday party builds commitment for environmental programs. One of my customers has photos of every employee indicating their years of service to the company mounted in the hallways. What a great way to recognize employee loyalty.

Probably the best example I ever witnessed of a program that was successful in getting employee buy-in occurred at Stork Cellramic. Stork's management put a team of employees together to evaluate the suggestions from the company suggestion box. What made this program unusual was giving the team a budget to work with and allowing the team to determine how those funds would be used.

The team took the program seriously, weighing the costs and benefits of each suggestion. Having limited funds, they couldn't do everything, so they set priorities. If a suggestion was not enacted, they explained the rationale behind their choices to the other employees. While unconventional, it was a highly successful program on several levels:

- Funding the program was a powerful signal that employees' ideas were valued. As a result, employees

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**"There's a problem with color matching. Who's fault is it?"**  
**"Theirs!"**

were more open to submitting suggestions;

- many of the ideas submitted (such as purchasing tooling, micrometers, shelving, or shop carts) were simple suggestions that saved time and made workstations more efficient;
- team members felt involved and empowered. They took the program seriously and made thoughtful use of the funds. Since the budget had to last the year, they were careful with what they purchased; and
- it was a great team-building exercise. Team members had to work together and come to a consensus.

The company probably would have eventually purchased many of the same items had the team not been assembled. Initiating the program, however, showed a level of respect and trust for the employees that the employees responded to with strong commitment.

So let me ask you: If you don't take the time to get your people up to speed on job duties, procedures and safety precautions, then who will? If you don't show them respect, should you be surprised at their unwillingness to reciprocate? If you don't show any level of regard for the importance of their job and of doing it well, why should they?

The fact is that even the most menial tasks are important. Doing them well can have a significant impact on a company's bottom line. Of course, doing them poorly affects the bottom line as well. Judging by the number of recent "going out of business" sales in flexo print shops, the impact may be far greater than most people appreciate.

It's true, some companies have the press operators per-

form these functions. That doesn't negate the importance of employee buy-in and retention. Efforts to recognize and reward initiative just bump up to the next level.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that all press helpers should get a raise. They have the responsibility to actually show up on time, perform their functions well, show initiative in learning new tasks, handle press components and ancillary equipment with care, follow established procedures, and use the training they are given. They need to do what needs to be done and be willing to put in overtime when needed. They have to treat company property well and treat other employees and managers with respect. Simply put, they have to earn a higher wage.

I am also not suggesting that you will not still have turnover at the lower level positions. But it would be much better to have well trained individuals manning those positions than to skimp over a few thousand dollars in wages and training, and suffer the consequences: low morale, minimal buy-in, and rapid turnover (and all of the damage and costs that go with it). Down the road, if they are moved into a position running a press, in the ink room or in quality assurance, the time and training invested will again reap benefits as they are better prepared for those jobs.

What I am suggesting is that the people at the top would be well served to direct more attention to those at the bottom. In doing so, they may find far fewer fires to have to fight, fewer spiraling costs to get control over, a more productive workforce, less employee turnover, improved morale, and an easier time achieving print quality. Perhaps, when struggling to deal with all of these problems, managers should consider them a wake-up call, a warning sign that something isn't right. Perhaps they should take them as a shot across the bow. ●

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