



Advanced Manufacturing Now

How Manufacturers Can Cope with COVID-19 While Becoming More Resilient

(Part two of a two part series by SME Podcasts)

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COVID-19 has been a major challenge for manufacturers, not only in dealing with the economic fallout but also in how to keep operating while maintaining employee safety. In this episode, Alan Rooks, Editor in Chief of Manufacturing Engineering magazine, talks with Robert Tessier, National Director of Advanced Fabrication Technologies for Airgas, about how companies can become more resilient and competitive during the COVID-19 pandemic; how they can enforce social distancing and use PPE to protect the health of employees, and with COVID-19 creating furloughs and reduction in force layoffs, consider how to recruit talent that fits their long-term needs.

Intro:

Aerospace and defense manufacturing. Machines and automation. Additive manufacturing. Smart manufacturing. Global manufacturing economy.

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Alan Rooks:

Welcome to another SME media podcast. Today's podcast is sponsored by Rex-Cut Abrasives, which provides high-performance products that help aerospace, automotive, and medical manufacturers minimize metal finishing steps and maximize production. Discover how you can improve your daily grind at RexCut.com. I'd like to thank our listeners for joining us on this episode of Advanced Manufacturing Now, the podcast for manufacturing professionals. I'm your host, Alan Rooks, editor in chief of Manufacturing Engineering magazine, and we're joined today by Robert Tessier, national director of advanced fabrication technologies for Airgas. Rob, welcome to the show.



Robert Tessier:

Well, thank you, Alan. I appreciate you inviting me on.

Alan Rooks:

We're glad to have you back for part two.

Robert Tessier:

Yeah.

Alan Rooks:

So to jump right in, we're going to be talking about the COVID-19 pandemic, which is obviously on everybody's mind. How will companies prepare to become more resilient and competitive as we deal with the current social and economic crisis caused in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Robert Tessier:

This is a good question, and I think obviously it's perfect right now. First and foremost, people really are going to have to pay attention to their total cost of ownership. And as they look at their P and L, you're going to have to start realizing that it goes past the cost of any specific product that you're purchasing, but how effective and how productive they are. Understanding basically what their operative factors look like, basically understanding what their productivity rates look like, and really looking at multiple APIs that will keep them productive and really help them measure progress and their competitiveness in the marketplace.

Robert Tessier:

I can tell you that what people need to really start studying or really start paying attention to is, somewhat, vertical integration. And it's a matter of taking control of their supply chains. Most of the customers and friends that I have in industry right now, what they found with COVID is their inability to get some of the common parts that they had been getting prior to. When I say vertical integration, I'm really looking at doing more forming on their own, doing more cutting processes on their own, and really being able to buy raw materials and create the parts that they're looking at so they can follow all the way through.

Robert Tessier:

In May, basically a May survey from Thomas, 64% of manufacturers responded that they're planning to bring production and sourcing back to the U.S. And it's just like, if that's the truth, we really need to start looking at how can we handle certain things and how can we remain competitive. And truthfully, that does have to do with the total cost of ownership. I mean, we start looking at global supply chains, I mean, we're really killed for several weeks when the virus shut down China and really here in the United States. This was pretty well devastating and moving forward, even though we're still in the throes of COVID-19, we really need to be up to



realize, how can we deal with this? Not only are we dealing with COVID at this point in time, but we're also dealing with an oil crisis.

Robert Tessier:

There hasn't been as much noise of that, but you've seen prices of gasoline and oil, the prices, I mean, they've dropped which at the pump seems to be fantastic. The problem is, is that with oil being \$40 or under per barrel, it shut down most of the oil industry, not only here in the United States, but worldwide. This is also creating another situation where people are really, they've lost a lot of expertise, and truthfully, as things start to come back up, they're going to have problems finding these people. We're going to have to focus on cross training, we're going to have to focus on new technology, and we're also going to have to focus on new skill sets needed to keep us competitive.

Alan Rooks:

Yeah, absolutely. It seems like you've really got to look at the supply chain and now we've got this whole new variable in the process, discover what that means to your own supply chain.

Robert Tessier:

That's absolutely the truth. It's not a matter of just, in the welding industry, just getting wire or gas. I mean, those things have been easily acquired. It really does come down to form parts or let's just say drives for a part-automated system or something of that nature. A lot of parts and a lot of industries would just literally shut down, and because of that, it's slowed everyone's economy down. We've got to pay attention to this and, truthfully, people have to take control of their own destiny.

Alan Rooks:

Absolutely. So with manufacturing operations reopening, how can companies enforce social distancing and use PPE to protect the health of employees? And how can good safety practices contribute to productivity?

Robert Tessier:

Let's start with the OSHA act of 1970, part of the general duty clause. And basically it says each employer shall furnish a place of employment, which are free from recognized hazards, or in other words, provide workers a safe and healthful workplace. So as industry goes, I mean, this is part of basically 29 CFR 1910, like I said, the general duty clause. We as employers have to recognize this as a hazard, and it's our responsibility to act accordingly. Now with that, or on top of that, we have to start thinking about what if a key person right now would have to self quarantine? Or worse, what happens if... Let's just say that person was put out of commission, either for a long period of time or permanently. Who's going to fill that position? What's going to be that financial impact.

Robert Tessier:

I mean, we start looking at companies and they're down to skeleton crews. It's really been pretty



devastating. So we really do need to step up and we need to look at how we can do certain things. I mean, asking or understanding physical distancing, understanding that we have to wash our hands and making sure that there are hand washing stations or basically hand cleaning stations available, making sure that employees have their own personal protective equipment, basically limiting a congregation or crowding in any specific area. And truthfully, just doing some of the simple things, like when somebody comes to the plant, just having a small screening operation coming in. Have somebody going ahead and it's just like ask basic questions. I mean, it's just like, Hey, look, do you feel sick, you have a cough fever, chills, or shortness of breath? I mean, do you feel all right?

Robert Tessier:

And if you don't, let's get you back home or let's get you tested. I mean, have you been doing a lot of traveling lately outside of the state, outside of the county, out of state, the country? It's just understand that there may be some markers that we can look at having been around anyone that's diagnosed with COVID-19. I mean, and truthfully, just having a protocol as to where we're going to check your temperature as you come walking in, that sort of thing. Truthfully, just making sure that people use their own tools. Don't share tools, try not to share common spaces or anything of that nature. Not every job is going to allow everyone to be six foot apart. In manufacturing, that's going to be very difficult, especially when there are very large items that people have to move, but we've got to be cognizant of that. Using face shields when you have to be up to see some of these words, you have to be able to see their facial expressions using a face shield can be absolutely, absolutely the answer. There could be more than one answer to solve this, but as companies and as employers, we really need to take care of our greatest asset, and that's the people.

Alan Rooks:

Absolutely. So during this crisis, had training in the skills gap taking a back seat to crisis management?

Robert Tessier:

It's like the bad guy in manufacturing or wherever it seems like has been the shortage of skilled workers. And I just mentioned a moment ago that companies are in that survival mode. They've had layoffs, they've had furloughs, and they're down to skeleton crews. And with that, I mean, it's just like the people that have been laid off and the people that have had furloughs, I mean, they still got to feed their families. They're out looking for another job or another opportunity, and it's just like the likelihood that they'll probably come back into this industry with their knowledge and with their experience is probably low. I mean, the thought process of why stay in a non-essential, low paying job or position is probably going to be sitting in the back of their mind as they move forward.

Robert Tessier:

If you were furloughed or you were laid off, it starts becoming difficult as to, well, is this the



career path that I need to be in? We have to take these things into account. Then of course you see the companies that are looking to go ahead and educate their employees as much as possible, or the people that they still have on board, while there's this lull that you're trying to deal with. Trying to produce parts, but at the same time, keep their employees up to speed. But now we have this thing called webinar burn out. I mean, it's just like, you can only go through so many webinars before your brain blows up. We have to kind of realize that the skill gap really has been put on pause. I mean, it's training and really looking at where we are and where a company is has not been at the forefront. I mean, it just hasn't been the forefront of everyone's mind. It's just a matter of, can we get through this and how long is it going to take to survive?

Alan Rooks:

Yeah, that's for sure. You've given us a lot to think about today, Rob. So to wrap up, let's tackle this question. With COVID-19 creating furloughs and reduction in forced layoffs, is it time for companies to consider how to recruit talent that fits their long term needs? You've called this, I think, a call to action threshold.

Robert Tessier:

It's one of these situations right now where whether it's a medical problem or whether it's an intestinal problem, or a lesser thing, there's a point where you realize that you have to do something or else you're not going to have a great outcome. In a medical situation, I mean, when you start becoming so sick that it's interfering with everything that you're doing, you'll seek medical attention and the doctor will go ahead and look at them, maybe like a blood test or something of that nature and determine that you have these underlying issues. When they can match that up against the database and say, Hey, look, you have this and if we don't do something, the outcome will be severe. This is that call to action threshold, this is that place where you make up your mind, "I've got to do something or else."

Robert Tessier:

As an industry, I think this, as horrible as COVID has been, has probably brought something to the attention of everyone, is this is that call to action. This is that threshold. I mean, with the layoffs, with the furloughs and all that, I mean, with everything that's going on, we've got to start looking at how are we going to stay in business and are we going to remain competitive? And how are we going to remain competitive? Not only now, but over the next decade or couple of decades. And the way to get there is, truthfully, today, assess your team's skills. Who do you have and what are they capable of doing? The next thing you have to really look at is how many other people have the same skillset? How many other people, if one individual were to be removed from that baseline, who else can do that job?

Robert Tessier:

You need to know how versatile people are, and once you develop that, once you understand what your team is capable of, and you have this baseline, now you start looking at what does the company need to do to become this versatile and really be able to deal with being competitive



over the next decade or so? You've got to find staff with the right set of skills, and these initial skills don't necessarily mean that they need to know everything about what you're doing, but they have to have the right attitude. They have to want to get up in the morning, they have to want to come to work, and you've got to be up to show them a way to one hit and get to the place that they want to be financially.

Robert Tessier:

It's just like you got to find people that you're willing to invest into, but better than that, you have to find people that are willing to invest in themselves as well as invest into your company. And the way to do that is by building that career path, you got to show them a way to the money. You got to show them a way so that they have financial independence, how to go ahead and take care of their family. They'll understand that what they're doing is important, not only just important, but essential to the company itself and how viable it will be moving forward. I'd suggest, truthfully, using COVID as a way to start doing interviews. Do blind interviews because, truthfully, if you're doing a interview, you can't let gender, race, age, or personal orientation, it won't get in the way.

Robert Tessier:

I mean, you're not going to be able to make these immediate thoughts that it's just like, well, I don't, I don't like this or I don't think about that. The truth of the matter is is that you'll start hiring a person on their ability on those initial skills that we spoke about. We've got to start looking at broadening the scope. There are people everywhere that can offer so much to us if you just open your mind. Blind interviews would be extremely important. Beefing up our HR group to understand that everyone doesn't fit the Superman category. They have job descriptions for people where they've got to have a master's degree in this or they've got to have 14 or 25 years of experience. These people don't exist, these people have jobs, they're already considered an essential employee someplace else.

Robert Tessier:

You've got to build yours and finding the right people is what it's all about. I mean, we've got to start giving reasonable requests to our HR personnel so that they can hire the right people. You're not going to find Superman. Wonder Woman is not going to come knock on your door and say, I'm here to help. This is not what's going to happen. We've got to build our own people. This is our call to action, right now. If we want this. And I know as an industry, and I've been in this industry for a long time, we want to be great. We want you going ahead and be productive. We want to be internationally competitive. Then we should want to go ahead and educate our own people and get them to where we want.

Robert Tessier:

There are a lot of young people, there are a lot of women, there are a lot of people that are out there that are willing to give at all if you just give them a chance. I'm saying now's that time. And we just need to, as crazy as it sounds, put on some blinders and truthfully stop thinking about



gender, stop thinking about race or age, and let's get it on. Bring the right people to your company, build a team that really is second to none. This is our call to action, and I believe this is where we've got to go.

Alan Rooks:

Well, it's a great way to explain that, Rob. Well, we're coming to the end of our podcast. Rob, thanks for your insights, we really appreciate you taking the time to join us today and give us such an eloquent response to some of the real needs of our industry. We appreciate it.

Robert Tessier:

All right, well, I really appreciate you having us on. And honestly, this is a message that I think that we need to share and I know a lot of people have opinions. This is my opinion, and thank you for letting me share it.

Alan Rooks:

Absolutely. And for our listeners, I'd like to point out that this is part two of a two-part series of podcasts with Rob focusing on staffing and the forming and fabrication industry. If you missed it, part one focuses on the skills gap in the forming and fabricating industry and can be accessed at www.sme.org/SMEMedia/podcasts. Thanks to everyone for joining us today.

Outro:

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