



Simulators & Software for the Graphic Arts

Willamette Industries - Flexo Case Study

Simulated Training Carries No Materials or Machine-Time Costs

Entry level press crewmembers at Willamette Industries preprinted linerboard plant in Richwood, Ky., frequently spend significant parts of their day in a virtual world. They travel there, not for pleasure and entertainment, but for skills-based training designed to establish a rock-solid foundation in the flexographic printing discipline. The Sinapse Graphic's innovative and just released FlexSys Press Simulator opens up the door to this other dimension to them. Tom Thackeray, the plant's production manager, served on the development team for the Simulator and now charts the course for six trainees to follow.

Measuring their progress falls to Thackeray as well. How does he think acquisition and installation of the Simulator has impacted the business and what benefits does he attribute to adoption of its training regimen? When asked, he rattled off the following list: "Improved productivity, reduced press downtime, enhanced problem-solving skills, improved camaraderie and more and more evidence of a definite 'can-do' attitude."

"Set-ups go quicker. Wash-ups go quicker. The group (all 20 press personnel split between a three-shift operation) is working together far, far better than before," Thackeray reported. This is a good way to train people without incurring materials and machine time costs. The Simulator addresses the problem-solving process better than any training device we've used in the past."

In executing exercises, programmed into the FlexSys Simulator by Thackeray, Willamette's trainees make adjustments on anilox impression and plate impression. They also maintain consistent ink-viscosity by cleaning the ink system's filter and pump. Streaks are eliminated by adjustments to the Doctor Blade. Knowledge of simple registration control procedures is tested by the challenges presented.

Training for the six members of the team, all of whom had no experience at all with flexography and no knowledge of how the plant's six-color Fischer & Krecke central impression press for wide web applications functioned, is still in progress, according to Thackeray. "Each person spends 30 minutes to 40 minutes a session on the

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Simulator. We schedule each individual for two to three sessions per week, depending on workload.”

Thackeray admitted, “It’s impossible to find people with flexographic printing skills. What we look to do is get somebody that is trainable. Our success rate is definitely good. Turnover is not a big problem at Willamette. We generally only lose one person every other year. That’s very rare in the highly competitive printing world. Even so, the Simulator is helping to save us money on training expenses.”

Willamette’s production manager indicated that the FlexSys Press Simulator is definitely user-friendly. “No one is intimidated by the Simulator!,” he proclaimed. “Everybody going through the training program possessed computer skills when he/she joined the staff. Everyone knew how to use a mouse, and that’s really all that is needed.”

Obviously, it took a little time for everybody to learn all the controls and what each did, but Thackeray said, “That’s to be expected.” The FlexSys Simulator is definitely meeting expectations, the production manager acknowledged. “This is Willamette’s only plant with a Simulator. I’d recommend that others get one, especially the box plants. Willamette has 42 corrugated plants.” The Simulator, in part, alleviates certain expenses (materials cost, downtime), associated with on-the-job training, which by necessity deals with problems when problems arise.

With the Simulator, Thackeray has instituted a far more formal and stringent review and employee assessment process. “Before an entry level employee can move up, he or she has to pass a test to be awarded the wage increase. The Simulator is part of the testing process. To date, a few people have been advanced and a few more are not too far away from their next review.”

Thackeray himself is a recent trainee, having journeyed to the FlexSys Training Corporation’s Baltimore-based headquarters to engage in the Train-the-Trainer program associated with the Simulator. “It was a very good experience,” he testified. “I would have liked to bring others along. The most significant thing that I got from my training was the fine-tuning of my ability to set up exercises and courses.

“It now takes just 30 minutes or 40 minutes to set up a simple exercise,” Willamette’s production director noted. “Once I have it in place, it’s there and can be used time and time again.”

Addressing the next steps in development of Willamette’s FlexSys Press Simulator training program, Thackeray said, “The only thing I need to do is finish constructing the different courses necessary to carry my people through the process and advance them from entry level trainee to expert press operator. Once the curriculum is in place the people will use it. My time line for action is immediate. I expect to have our full program completed within the next few months.”

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*For Additional details on the FlexSys Press Simulator, contact Sinapse Graphic
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