

An AV Worker Shortage – In This Economy??!?!

It all began with a Monday morning rant in a blog post by Dawn “AVDawn” Meade, owner of Advanced Video Systems in Owings Mills, Maryland. Her beef? A shortage of qualified AV workers and her fruitless months-long search for a tech with basic AV knowledge and professionalism to handle themselves appropriately in the field and in the office. Hmmmm, can this be right? We have nearly double-digit unemployment numbers and she can’t find even one qualified person?

“Our company has been looking for a few good A/V technicians since June this most recent go-round, but in reality the problem has been around as long as I've been in the industry (10+ years),” she replies to me via email. “In the past two years, it's become a critical problem. In the past two years, we went through about six AV techs before we arrived at the two we have now. ”

Okay, so maybe this is a regional issue? Competition can be tough in the Washington, D.C. area. Or perhaps this is just an issue with integration firms? After all, it takes a specific skill set to thrive as an AV tech – you need AV knowledge, troubleshooting skills, and you need to be personable, accountable, and customer service oriented.

Dawn says that what is missing is the right mix. “One tech had excellent AV skills and work ethic but ended up leaving for a government contractor position, two had passable skills but were flaky in their work ethic and professionalism, and three were just complete wrecks!,” she adds. “We'd love to hire at least one more skilled AV tech but we simply cannot find experienced or even skilled AV workers.”

She also says that one tech’s “skills” in no way represented AV best practices. “One guy cut some cables and did a field splice using SCOTCH TAPE to hold the cables together! [It] would not pass inspection... or even signal! Obviously, he did not last on the job site!”

As Michael Bridwell, marketing communications manager at AV manufacturer Digital Projection, notes, “Hiring for key positions in a smaller company is a much more sensitive issue than filling a managerial position with a large corporation. You not only need someone with the ability to fill the immediate role, but also someone flexible enough to wear numerous hats at that level. And, to make matters more complicated, they need to be a good fit with the company dynamic, as small companies tend to have their own culture.”

Turns out that Digital Projection has struggled to fill their application support manager position for the past year; they only recently found the right candidate and filled the position, but this was after nearly 12 months of searching!

In Dawn’s case, potential candidates either have IT or cable/satellite/phone company experience and think that those skills are easily transferrable. Dawn adds, “Once in a while, we find that gem who has experience and reputation and everything we're looking for - but they're generally asking for a lot more than our small business can offer. They're too good.”

What is intriguing is how much chatter her blog post has unleashed. If this has always been a problem, why aren't we



talking about it more? Better yet, what are we doing to alleviate this growing crisis? Could there be a way to bring increased awareness about our industry?

The answer to that last question is: Yes! I think Dawn's blog post came at an opportune time and dovetails nicely with a quick discourse about AV Week (<http://www.infocomm.org/cps/rde/xchg/infocomm/hs.xsl/10670.htm>), which is happening October 18-24 this year. This week is set aside to celebrate our industry and to reach out via presentations, workshops, and career fairs.

Although AV Week is just one week, there no reason why the spirit of AV Week can't be utilized all year round. Go out into your community and make yourself known. Offer an internship so that high school and college-aged kids know that AV is a viable and rewarding career path. Go to college career fairs and hiring events so that this next generation knows that AV exists. Put in place your own "AV Bootcamp" so that incoming techs have to intensely train in your shop and learn your methods for a week before they're out in the field, regardless of their background or previous AV knowledge.

There needs to exist some give-and-take to find (or create) the right mix of skills. AV is such a niche industry that, unless we cannibalize the nearest competitor for their workers, we have to get creative on ways to grow our workforce.

So now it's your turn. Send me a note and tell me how you're increasing awareness during AV Week and beyond, or your thoughts on how to find the right AV candidates.

Have an opening for an AV job? Looking for an AV job? Check out our totally free AV job board:
http://ravepubs.com/index.php?option=com_jobline&Itemid=169

Linda Seid Frembes is a freelance journalist who covers AV technology, installs, market trends and industry news. Linda has worked with high profile AV manufacturers, trade organization, systems integrators, rep firms and dealer/distributors in the industry including John Lyons Systems, Eastern Acoustic Works (EAW), Northern Sound & Light (NSL), and InfoComm International, among others. Reach her at linda@rAVEpubs.com

