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Reality Check: It's the People, Stupid

By Tom Gorman

However complex our networks get, however competitive our business is, there is one constant that cannot be overlooked: our people. People do the planning, designing, implementing and maintaining of these complex networks and systems. Phone, DOCIS 3.0, switched digital, all-digital networks, dense wavelength division multiplexing (DWDM) transmission, and advanced advertising systems are being deployed all over the country at a great pace in order to be competitive. The pressure is great, and these technologies provide a compelling reason for customers to choose cable over our competitors.

Yet, for as long as we've been in business, we've been working to get to someone's house on time, all the time. How hard can that be?

The algorithms to accomplish it are immense. Time of day, skill set, customer requirement and geography all come into play. We now have the technology and automated systems to set us up, but we have to understand the needs of the "people element."

Now cable operators are deploying smarter automated systems to do the heavy lifting for work assignment. In this world of automation, one of the things I notice is the need to measure compliance. Automation systems are designed to operate a specific way, and when there is an attempt to "customize," the system doesn't work. The reason it appears harder than the deployment of all our new technologies is simple. People.

People have the ability to change the plan at a moment's notice. Unlike devices with on/off switches, people make decisions to do things differently than planned, and automated systems don't work as designed when that occurs. Once automated systems are in place, the days of technicians determining their routes and being in control of their days are gone.

There is also a danger to deploying such automation. That is from believing that the tool is the cure to all our ills, and that once it is deployed, one can sit back and relax while everything works. While some functions get some workload relief, it really is a system that requires a lot of attention to keep it working. It is not difficult at all to have a bad implementation. As methods and procedures change, so must we. Investing in regular discussion, reinforcement and feedback on how it works (or doesn't work) makes for good operational procedures.

So back to the people. Some months back, Patrick Hunter wrote about the new work force, the millennial generation coming into the industry. Even though these new technicians grew up in a world of cell phones, iPods, and Playstation, the need to invest in them hasn't changed. The need for mentoring, coaching, training, and teaching accountability hasn't waned over the years, but it may have been set aside.

Email, mass quantities of data, conference calls and meetings do not solve this issue. Meeting the technicians in the field and giving them a hand, saying "thanks for being reliable" and giving time to attend an SCTE meeting are all personal investments that pay off in big ways. If techs work from home (thanks to automation), an astute supervisor will meet them at their first job to help them get their day started, provide some on-the-job training and stay connected. In place of the morning team meeting, a conference bridge roll call and information update to a dispersed team keeps everyone on the same page. That kind of investment is, and always will be, the most important thing to building a skilled workforce.

I write this during a week with the stock market near collapse and everyone talking on what to invest in. You'll never go wrong investing in your people.