

Gulf construction faces widening skills gap

The market downturn and its onslaught on the bottom-line have left enterprises looking for productivity in pursuit of profits. Of the various cost components that need to be tweaked, foremost is staff productivity.

In the construction or maintenance industry, there is always room for improvement in workforce output. Especially at the project level, the productivity woes mainly emanate from a lack of skill credentials, aptitude levels, inadequate supervision and service infrastructure, and organisational failures in effective HR management.

The need for technical credentials is a global issue as most educational and technical institutes have not updated their curriculums. And the teaching capabilities and educational infrastructure need to change as per the work requirements for technical professionals.

In the Middle East it has its impact and the much-needed skills needed from the technical workforce are not on par and have limited exposure to global best practices. They are not familiar with the changes in building technologies due to their local only experiences. Their exposure requires more training to support the needed competence.

The current trends in building technologies have indeed helped to reduce both capital and operating expenditures. Companies thus need to concentrate on improvising on their recruitment and onboarding processes.

A comprehensive skill set review at the time of onboarding orientation can help identify the skill gaps and provide insights to offer corrections. However a comprehensive recruitment process — considering the market pricing — remains a Herculean challenge.

An exhaustive onboarding induction about project operations such as contract compliance, KPIs and soft skills is critical for full orientation. This process is a must instead of rushed schedules. Another aspect is the internal communication as productivity takes its toll due to improper communication protocols.

It is not just verbal communication, but the etiquettes that are vital to maintaining client and organisational engagement as efficiently as possible. Training in problem-solving and resolution management can significantly influence and increase output.

An excellent service organisation with the best of skilled people can still fail if its service infrastructure and processes are not adequate. Of this quality, functionality and durability of equipment are vital for project efficiency as their impairment can significantly impact productivity.

Besides this, other service infrastructure — tool boxes, logistics, stores and technology aids such as hand-held devices — are all drivers to align productivity gains. Advancement in automation in tools and equipment has boosted staff efficiency and improved safety levels.

The modern-day tool boxes are helping business to rationalise headcounts. Provision of appropriate toolkit along with critical training is must as productivity issues also emanate from some common practices such as inadequate toolbox handling or misuse of the equipment available.

Companies must adopt automation as the primary driver of this strategy to boost service infrastructure needs, and all projects must have timely availability of consumables and spare parts. Any delays therein lead to unemployed man hours so stores and spare parts must be well in place to avoid any pilferage of man-hours.

Productivity woes can compound without proper on-the-job training. Due to limited mobilisation timelines and zero cost provision for training, there remains a significant lacuna. In most cases, training is left to a trial and error method that sets a dangerous precedent. Continued pressure on profit margins further compounds the issue.

Inefficiency in labour output due to improper employee management results in personnel grievances, absenteeism and attrition that impact project productivity. Not all organisations have understood that low productivity has a direct relationship with this.

There are other market challenges in attracting a technical workforce. More college interns are opting for desk jobs than field ones. The economic growth in countries from where these people are hired is fuelling the need for skilled people, wherein demand is more than the supply.

Apart from this, there is an issue of wage parity due to changes in minimum wages. In countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Philippines, there are fewer takers for jobs in the Middle East due to these factors.

To sustain the productivity initiative, companies do need to rethink innovative recruitment.

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