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## Narrow Web Training

Whether in the formal setting of a trade school, or in the label shop itself, training for narrow web printers is a necessary practice that continues to evolve.

By Michelle Sartor

As a converter, having the best or most up to date equipment is essentially useless without personnel who know how to operate it, and operate it well. Therefore training plays a major role in a company's success. No two organizations train their employees in identical ways. Some send their people to schools, others have trainers come to their facilities and some rely on in-house methods. Converters find training systems that works best for their company and employees.

Two schools in the USA specialize in training press operators: the Flexographic Trade School in Fort Mill, SC, and the DiTrollo Flexographic Institute in Broadview, IL. The goal of both schools is to teach individuals how to operate flexo presses and prepare them for careers with converting companies.

Both press and prepress training are available at the Flexographic Trade School (FTS). The school offers 12-week press courses for any interested individual. More intensive four- and six-week courses are available exclusively for members and vendors of the school. A 16-week prepress course is offered, as well as custom courses that can be three days, one week or other specified lengths.

In order for individuals to be allowed in the FTS program, they must first pass an entrance exam with a score of 85 percent or higher. According to Art Fields, president of FTS, 70 percent of the people don't pass the entrance exam. He also says that younger students have more difficulty completing the entire program. Of the students under age 24, he says, the graduation rate is only 20 percent. According to Chuck Fields, sales and administrative director of FTS, the average age of students going through the program is 25 to 27. He says most students go into narrow web, though some go into wide web work.

For training purposes, FTS uses equipment from its vendor sponsors. The school recently acquired two new Mark Andy 2200 presses equipped with AAA UV units. Also recently installed is a Printing Technology Services Inc. JETFLEX Variable Data Inkjet Printing System. Students learn prepress with the DuPont FAST plate system and Esko digital imaging equipment. The school currently has no servo presses.

During their course of study, students of FTS run live work for the school's members, enabling them to get a real sense of how to run acceptable jobs. The school requires that students take a press test and a written test for graduation. Chuck Fields says there isn't a set test given on press, but that it's usually a print job for one of the FTS members. More of the final grade is based on the press test, but the written exam must also be passed for graduation. Attendance is another big component of the school's graduation process. Students are allowed only one unexcused tardy and one unexcused absence before being told they are not allowed to continue.

FTS graduates must stay with the company they choose for two years in order to remain in the program. As part of the course, FTS allows paying students to come in for free classes after graduation. Students on scholarship must remain with their employer for two years to fulfill the scholarship. Otherwise, they must pay for their initial training.

According to Chuck Fields, FTS emphasizes safety in its training programs. "Safety is number one. It's the number one thing people get called into the office for."



L&NW's Brian Barnes trains on a Mark Andy 2200 press at the Flexographic Trade School in Fort Mill, SC, USA.

Chuck Fields also explains that FTS doesn't just teach students. "We're more than a school. We do tech support, evaluate companies, consult, and set up companies. If it has to do with flexo, we're doing it or we will be."

The DiTrollo Flexographic Institute (DFI) offers three different types of training. The company's 18-week vocational program takes students who know nothing about printing, teaches them how to run presses with four-color process and helps find them jobs in the industry. Vince DiTrollo, CEO of DFI, says the school has had 100 percent placement of students since July 2005. The second type of training offered are seminars given at the DFI facility, which are available at different levels. Finally, the school offers on-site training at converters' sites. DiTrollo says DFI is working on a partnership with All Printing Resources to provide prepress training. "The idea is to take those that understand how to use the programs and teach them the dos and don'ts for flexo," he says.

To train students, DFI uses presses from Webtron, Mark Andy and Propheteer. DiTrollo says, "With the vocational program, it's very important to train operators on the actual equipment they'll be running at the shops they'll be going to. They're not going to be put on the newest equipment out there. We teach them to run on the older machines."

DFI students are trained manually on press. "We use the philosophy that if I teach you how to drive a stick shift car today, you can drive anything," DiTrollo says. "A lot of press operators may be pressing a button, but they don't understand what happens when they push that button."

DFI has an advisory board of converters that is involved in the educational programs. DiTrollo says, "They make sure training is going in the right direction. The vocational program is recertified every year by the Illinois State Board of Education." The school has charged membership fees that DiTrollo says are used to fund scholarships that bring more students into the industry.

To enter the vocational program, students must have a certain level of reasoning and math. They must be drug free, pass an industry specific physical and they can't be color blind. There is also a 10-point ethic program, including punctuality and attendance. Students take weekly quizzes, which consist of flexographic industry specific technical information. They take a midterm exam, with about 100 questions in written form, and produce a job on press within industry standard time constraints. The final exam is a four-color process job on press and 200 written questions. The school averages about 30 graduates per year.

DFI uses an internship program to place students into jobs. DiTrollo says, "A lot of the converters want to hire press operators, but before they go 100 percent with them, they want to try them out." DFI tracks graduates for a minimum of one year. According to DiTrollo, 95 percent of graduates stay with their companies for more than a year.

The school is willing to work with both students and converters if a problem arises. DiTrollo says, "We guarantee the quality of our education — that students know what they're doing. If one of our employers doesn't like a student, we give them extra training (for example, an instructor on site for the student). We've done outside training to get students over the hurdles of joining a new team. We do stand behind our students."

## Costs

FTS charges \$3,000 for its 12-week press course for students coming in on their own. They receive a \$500 discount if they will work outside a 50-mile radius of Fort Mill, SC, USA. Students who receive scholarships may go through the program for free. The school is currently involved in a nationwide scholarship promotion with Crystal Carolina Sports, a USSSA baseball organization that holds tournaments across the US for 10 months of the year. FTS representatives also speak at high schools and offer students scholarships.

Converter members of FTS pay \$2,000 for their employees to take the 12-week press course and \$2,500 for the 16-week prepress course. The school's three-day print optimization course is \$1,250. Custom classes cost between \$1,250 and \$3,000.

Chuck Fields says FTS has between 150 and 180 members from six different countries. He says, "You have to be a member to hire students, get tech support and send employees for intensive training." The school has two types of membership. Client members pay \$500 per year plus an additional \$1,500 per hire. Charter members pay \$3,000 their first year and \$500 each additional year and may hire an unlimited number of students.

According to DiTrollo, DFI offers two- and three-day seminars that cost between \$545 and \$745 per participant. DiTrollo says the cost for individuals in the vocational program depends on what grants and scholarships they qualify for. Recently, DFI has been approved by the US Veteran's Affairs as a post-secondary educational institution for veterans. Those who are returning from active duty can benefit from government support of a flexo education.

Both schools have high enrollment rates. Chuck Fields has seen an increase in members sending employees and believes total enrollment has increased in the past seven years that the school has been open. He says they promote their classes through ads, trade shows, gun and hunting shows, through word of mouth, and through members and vendors. "We live and die by reputation," he says.

DiTrollo says, "We still have a bigger demand for students than we can sell. We're constantly posting on web sites for open positions in the Chicago area and throughout the United States."

### Why choose schools?

The costs associated with school membership and training might seem high, but those converters that have relationships with schools find the investment worthwhile. Pat Hill, production manager at Label Technology, a converting company in Merced, CA, USA, uses FTS to train entry level employees that have worked at the plant and proven themselves. He says, "The overall cost is \$6,500 to \$7,000 by the time I pay for the school, flights, hotel, food, the whole nine yards. I feel like I'm money ahead. It's a cash investment up front, but it's proven that it's worth it.

"Over the years I've tried to train internally with mixed results. We did have some success with it, but we also had some failures. And even with the successes, it was extremely time consuming and costly," explains Hill. One downside to internal training, according to Hill, is that an experienced press operator must take on a teaching role. Not all operators want to train newcomers and that can cause friction.

Label Technology sends employees to FTS for four weeks. After the course, Hill says, "Our people are not necessarily ready to jump on the press, but the learning curve is reduced dramatically. Typically in a week or two they're ready to go." Label Technology provides on-the-job training, starting new FTS graduates on its smallest presses, which Hill says usually run the easiest work.

Suzanne Zaccone, president of GSI Technologies in Burr Ridge, IL, USA, was a founding member of DFI and currently holds the position of chairman of the board of directors. She says, "Vince and his staff are current on press operations and best practices. They are able to demonstrate new ways to do old things; their knowledge on materials, inks, dies, and equipment is hard to beat; and — in short — they are capable teachers in just about everything having to do with narrow web printing. The institute is an excellent source for keeping our staff current and fresh in their approach to their work every day."

Zaccone has never hired a DFI graduate, but she's sent new hires as well as seasoned employees for refresher courses. GSI Technologies has also used DFI in other ways. "One of the finest benefits we've used from the institute was having Vince tour our facility and closely review our equipment and processes so he could evaluate and critique our operation for continuous improvement."

I.D. Images, a converter in Brunswick, OH, USA, has used DFI to help train employees in the flexo process for the past two years. In addition to using the institute's program, the company also trains with vendors and equipment providers.

Jamie Tomlinson, production manager for Rustic Label, a converter in Fort Mill, has hired three FTS graduates. Two of those have left for other employment opportunities while one is still currently working there. He says, "FTS does a fantastic job in training their students. We hire them because we know what we are getting — someone who has been trained properly for our business."

Tomlinson says, "We've been a charter member of FTS for about four or five years and have a great working relationship with them. They are very helpful in many areas of our business."

Arkansas Labeling Inc., a converting company in Bryant, AR, USA, has been involved with FTS for about five years. Owner Rodney Harris has only hired one FTS graduate, but he's sent at least four employees to the school for training. In addition to teaching his employees the basics of flexo, Harris likes the idea of having outside training. He says, "Sometimes it's better to have someone else tell them what to do, especially with a family owned business."

Another advantage Harris cites is the ability for FTS graduates to teach him and other current employees what they've learned. "We've learned a lot of things from him [the graduate hired] as far as the quickest way to do things and little tricks of the trade. We've probably showed him how to do a couple things the way we do it too." So the training cycle never really ends.

## Other options

Schools are not the only ways to train flexo employees. Tek Solutions, East Stroudsburg, PA, USA, is a prepress company that provides hands on training at converting facilities, as well as research and development. The company offers training for all aspects of flexo: from prepress to press to customer service. This type of consulting originated five or six years ago. Keith Ramos, owner and president of Tek Solutions, says, "We'll go into a company that has no experience and work with them for a few days. Every course is outlined for that customer's specific needs. All the training is done at their facility."

Ramos believes that an advantage of using Tek Solutions is that the training staff goes to the converters. This way, he says, the trainers are dealing with the actual problems converters' employees may be experiencing while on the job.

PDF Seal, a converting company in Deer Park, NY, USA, has been involved with Tek Solutions for about three years. Jeremy Bank, operations manager, says, "They provided us with flexographic printing training. First they did press, management and efficiency studies." Bank says Tek Solutions charges a per day fee that varies depending on how many people need to be trained and what type of training is being performed. He finds the cost to be worthwhile. "They brought the most complete and all around knowledge of the printing process from the office, printing and prepress standpoint," Bank says.

Some converters use in-house methods of training to teach employees. Scott Pillsbury, president of Rose City Label Company in Portland, OR, USA, says, "Press operator training is done in-house by an experienced operator and supervised by the production manager. We tend to get better results by hiring hard workers with good mechanical ability, and training them from the ground up, rather than getting operators from other shops."

Although Rose City Label mainly uses on-the-job training, Pillsbury says the company will pay for work related college classes, computer classes and art/prepress courses. The company also uses suppliers. Pillsbury explains, "We do use our suppliers, not so much on equipment, but on techniques to help with inks, stock and diecutting as needed. We don't use them enough — suppliers are a key resource that we should use more — but we do make use of them from time to time."

Tom Cobery, president of Aladdin Label Inc. in Waukesha, WI, USA, explains his practices. "We are a small company and rely on a sort of unofficial mentoring program. Training is handled by department heads and fellow employees within that department. All look out for and help the new employee in his or her training as well as a transition into the company. As it relates to new equipment, we insist on vendor training at our plant. Then we initiate training of other employees by the vendor-trained employee. Current employees are given training when we purchase new equipment or make system changes. We do not employ a full time trainer."

The Label Printers, a converter in Aurora, IL, USA, uses in-house training on an as-needed basis for new employee orientation and cross training. The company doesn't have an employee specifically assigned to training, but its human resources director is responsible for coordinating training schedules. Lori Campbell, general manager, explains: "Training needs for each employee is position-specific and it's up to the job description to identify skill requirements and the supervisor, in conjunction with human resources, to make sure training is appropriately scheduled. Quarterly reviews keep everyone on track for discussing training done in the previous quarter and what is planned for the next quarter."

In addition to teaching employees internally, Campbell says, "We utilize suppliers to train on new equipment and this runs the gamut from on-site training to sending employees to supplier sites for focused training. Often it will depend on what the supplier offers and/or the complexity of the training. We also will bring suppliers in periodically to conduct seminars for sales and customer service on inks or materials."

The Label Printers also uses other methods. Campbell says, "We send employees to some of the trade schools and similar learning opportunities at colleges. We constantly evaluate the marketing pieces and newsletters for good advanced training."

Having a mixture of training methods may be the best approach. Chuck Fields explains, "It takes two years to be a full press operator. You can't get efficient in three months and know everything." He tells converters that it takes about three to four weeks for a student graduating FTS with a C to be proficient on the same press he or she trained on. Therefore students' learning doesn't end with graduation, but continues with on-the-job work.

As Arkansas Labeling's Harris points out, "You never stop learning in this industry."