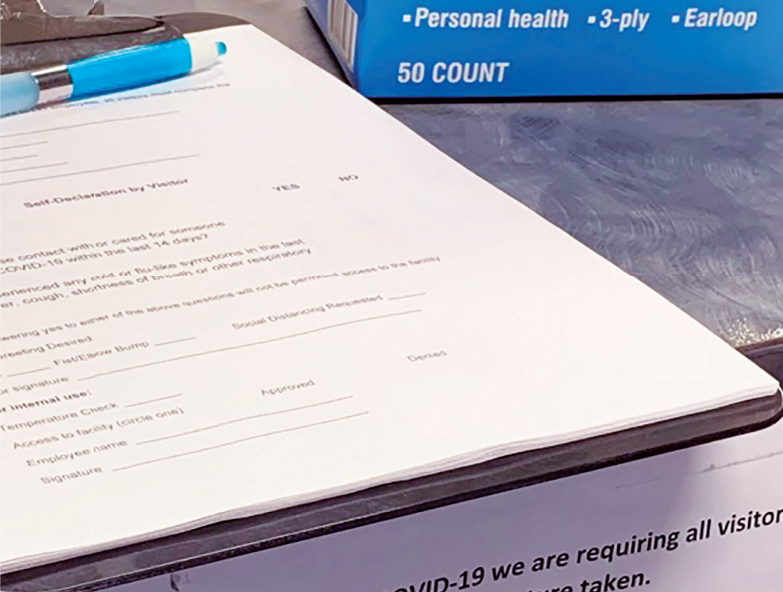


# Electrical Apparatus

More than Motors



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## Hiring during a pandemic

Finding the right person for the job in trying times



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# Hiring through a pandemic

Trying to find the right fit for your shop is difficult enough under “normal” circumstances. Add in a restrictive and uncertain pandemic, and it’s even tougher.

**By Selena Cotte, EA Managing Editor**

While many unlucky companies have had to face layoffs and business shutdowns after a year of turbulent economic conditions and restrictions, many in the electrical business were still in the process of growth.

Recruitment and hiring remained a priority for a number of companies deemed “essential,” in spite of traveling constraints, social distancing, and other precautionary measures. While hiring can be seen as a positive for a company, as having the means to hire must mean something is going right, it can also be a source of stress.

In recent years, we’ve covered struggles that businesses in the electrical aftermarket have faced regarding hiring and recruitment. It is no secret that there has been a shortage of qualified shop workers, and fewer avenues to hiring.

While the military and certain farm communities are still fruitful training grounds for would-be mo-

tor guys, recruitment is often more complicated than placing a simple “Help Wanted” sign in the window.

## Recruiting for motor jobs

“Recruitment and hiring has been difficult in our industry for a number of years, it just seems there’s not a huge talent pool out there,” Peter McIntosh, CEO at McIntosh Industries, told *EA*. McIntosh Industries, based in Hillside, N.J., primarily services the elevator industry, with jobs across the country. They also keep hiring notices posted almost constantly across the country in order to get the widest pool of qualified workers.

“The talent pool tends to fall on guys who are either seniors, say 50 and above, who have been in the industry and plan to finish their careers there, or it falls to very young guys let’s say 20-25, who are very green but willing to learn,” he said. “It is rare to find somebody that’s in the 30-50 age group, which is that sweet spot where they have some experience but you can still get 20-30 years of work out of them.”

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## **HIRING** continued from previous page

Part of this can be attributed to a misunderstanding of motor work and broad discouragement away from the field, McIntosh says.

“One of the big problems is that there seems to be a social stigma to blue collar work,” McIntosh added. “You have guys making \$100-200k a year, without the need for higher education and they have no supervising responsibility. Most of them are supervised by people with college degrees, making 50-75% of what they’re making. But there’s still that stigma against it.”

While McIntosh involves his business with local initiatives, including a consortium of New Jersey colleges, to bring attention to advanced manufacturing and the necessity of manual labor, the issue is a long-term problem that cannot be fixed overnight, contributing to the overall shortage of capable labor.

To gain the best advantage, many businesses utilize recruitment firms or targeted ads (sometimes meant to reach people in a specific area, and sometimes more broadly to qualified people across the country) to reach

potential workers, but even this can have its own difficulties.

“First of all, in an average month we probably go through about 175-200 responses to our ads,” McIntosh said. “Of those responses, the vast majority are weeded out very quickly. Of the ones that we invite to fill out an application and/or come in for an interview, a pretty good percentage that just don’t show up at all. Then, we lose about 20% of our candidates after a mandatory drug test.”

Even when you ultimately bring in someone to work in your shop, you still have to deal with training and trial periods, which just add more stress to an already difficult process. Will that person stay on the job? Will they take to their training? Hiring, especially a previously unqualified candidate, entails risk for whatever company takes them on.

## **Covid-19 safety and preparation**

As we approach a year of lockdown and Covid-19, in various and varying stages de-

pendent on your location, many shops have found themselves changing their approach to work in general.

“We have documented cleaning of all community surfaces twice each day; documented temperature assessment of each employee each day; documented exposure assessment and notification; doubled weekly deep cleaning of the entire facility; installed shields in community areas to encourage distancing; as well as asked all visitors to fill out a questionnaire and given a fever assessment,” Mike Lay, President of Layco Electric Innovations (LEI) said. The company, based in Tulsa, Okla., also split shifts to limit the number of people in confined spaces.

Many similar changes have been made at shops and plants across the country to great effect. However, the process of hiring and recruitment fundamentally requires businesses to interact with new people, making compliance with Covid-19 restrictions more difficult.

“Most of the process is done over the phone,” McIntosh said. “We were pretty much willing to bring anyone in as early as possible before, but now there’s more screening and checking qualifications before they come in and take the mechanical aptitude test. Before, we would invite people to come in and take a shop tour and fill out an application. Now, we’ll do it all upfront and only bring in candidates we’ve identified with a higher potential. The physical interview has been delayed to further in process—about a week or so has been added overall.”

“The process we utilize has changed,” Sean Sampson,



—Layco Electric Innovations image

*Layco Electric Innovation, based in Tulsa, Okla., tackled social distancing, frequent disinfection, and split shifts to protect their employees from Covid-19. The pre-cautions, however, meant the company had to re-approach its hiring strategies to accommodate new rules and restrictions.*



—Layco Electric Innovations image

Layco Electric Innovations used glass barriers between employees to protect them from Covid-19. They also subject new hires to more stringent safety procedures, to minimize risk for all parties.

Plant Manager at Littlejohn-Reuland, said.

Littlejohn-Reuland, based in Vernon, Calif., has been looking to hire winders and a sales manager since the pandemic began.

“I believe the largest change is that before, when people responded to an ad, we invited them in to fill out an application and interview. Now when someone responds to an ad, we have them send in their resume, and if we like what we see on it then we have a phone interview (sometimes with more than one person).”

At Littlejohn-Reuland, the interviews themselves have also changed.

“If we invite the person in for an interview then there’s maybe more than one person

conducting the interview at the same time,” Sampson said. “In the past sometimes a person would have two interview with different people at different times, and there were very few phone interviews.

## New and different circumstances

Safety is not the only consideration at hand. Covid-19 has also disrupted the economy, changing the way the job landscape operates. In turn, the applicant pool has changed.

While some may assume that a tough job market and high unemployment might bring in more and better applications, they would be incorrect.

“There’s been no uptick in quality candidates,” Sampson said, noting that this was the part of pandemic hiring that stung the most. “Too many unqualified people thinking they are qualified.”

For LEI, applications have come in at about the same rate as ever, if not “a bit lower,” Lay told us.

As for McIntosh Industries, responses have fluctuated over the pandemic.

“We started advertising for jobs again in about June,” McIntosh said. “From then until the end of September, there was a definite downturn in responses, probably by 50%. Now it’s back to what I would consider a close to normal response, but applicants are less qualified now.”

There may be a few factors at play here, with the first being that those with experience may be unlikely to look for better opportunities due to economic uncertainty, and a desire to buckle down while the storm passes.

“People who are qualified are not seeking improvement or seeking to make a change,” McIntosh said. “Before, people were more aggressive about the job search. They were trying to advance themselves into better positions.”

Another reason may be the temptation of relying on government support.

“The government subsidies, while well-intentioned, have pushed some people to stay home rather than work,” Lay said, maintaining a neu-

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—Andrea Piacquadio / Pexels image

*Many motor shops have historically preferred to bring in potential workers for shop tours and mechanical aptitude tests early on in the hiring process. However, Covid-19 restrictions have led them to conduct more phone interviews and take a more stringent look at each application before inviting candidates in for in-person interviews and other risky tasks. While a convenient alternative, many shops do not prefer this new way of hiring, and instead hope for the day normal processes can return.*

#### **HIRING continued from previous page**

tral attitude about it. “Government help is a mixed bag of both good and unintended consequences.”

McIntosh echoed these concerns.

“Here in New Jersey, unemployment averages about \$35 an hour,” he said. “We start out our really green hires from \$24-28 an hour. So, it gets difficult to persuade younger candidates to want to try.”

With these new challenges arisen, the typical challenges of hiring for a motor shop have only become more amplified, leading to alternative methods of recruitment.

LEI, which has attempted to find people to staff its winding department through the pandemic, has turned to using recruiters to fill its vacancies.

“The process has always been difficult. While mechanical folks can be located, the winding department is a real problem,” Lay said. “Previously, we used more of a direct hiring method. Today, while we still locate and select the future employees, they are hired by an employment service for 90 days before being officially onboarded with our company as an employee.”

### **Takeaways moving forward**

While companies have made the best of their tough situations, there hasn’t been much enthusiasm about how hiring processes have changed. “When this crap is over, I hope to go back to how we used to hire,” Sampson said.

While some broader changes related to Covid-19 may stick around, such as an emphasis on staying home when sick, and otherwise being mindful of one’s own health and hygiene, no one else seems to think the hiring process has been made any easier.

“We will not be keeping any of these changes, other than our efforts to create a safer work environment resulting from the virus,” Lay said.

While it is unknown when exactly it will be over, it is not a guarantee that even when it does, motor shops will be easier to staff.

In spite of these challenges, there is work to be done, motors to be repaired, coils to be rewound. Hires have been made, both long- and short-term—McIntosh tells us of one new employee who lasted a week before returning to his old industry of truck driving.

Even when it takes a while, and a headache and a half—most have found a way to make hiring work, and will continue to do so as long as there’s a need.

**EA**