

Just Call Me 'Coach'

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Over a lifetime we have the opportunity to develop many interests and hobbies. As we age, our interests and friends change. But our careers usually stay on the same path.

I was recently sitting with several 'seasoned' vibration specialists and we were lamenting the fact that many of the young people who enter our field do not stay long. There were several reasons that we came up with that could be the cause of limited time "in the field."

Possibly the foremost reason may be the fact that many activities of a so-called vibration specialist do not happen during 'normal' working hours. If any vibration problem impacts production or operations then it cannot be evaluated during the 9 to 5 shift and must be done during some obscene hour when the sun never shines. If by some miracle the evaluation is done when the sun does shine, the vibration analyses are scheduled on a weekend. To add an additional insult, the weather can be totally uncooperative. I cannot remember the last time I balanced any large machine during the daylight hours that was not on a weekend.

My worst job was at a midwestern utility testing fans that were to be replaced. The test equipment setup took place during daylight hours in early March. The sun was shining and I only needed a light jacket when the day began – what a shock. As the job progressed into the late night, it started to rain. During 12 hours of data collection, the rain totaled four inches. Anything is better than walking around in mud and six inches of water, trying not to fall, and hoping the tent over the equipment does not collapse due to the weight of accumulating water.

But the most memorable part of this job turned out to be dodging ice that regularly formed on the exhaust stack during winter. Just as we were finishing up the test, the ice decided this would be an excellent time to fall. The next day it took longer to clean the equipment, cables, and sensors than it did to do the data collection. I must admit that after the testing was completed and the equipment cleaned, I gave serious thought to why any college graduate, or anyone with a third-grade education, for that matter, would ever choose vibration specialist as a career.

Boredom is second on the list of reasons for cutting short a budding career in vibration. It's usually the least seasoned people in the office who get the

vibration monitoring chores – the 'doldrums' of the vibration field. Hours spent walking around hot, dirty equipment moving a sensor from point to point and pushing the 'Enter' button – excitement beyond belief and a sore thumb to boot.

The third good reason – long hours on assignments with little or no recognition. Anyone who works in this field will get a call at the most inconvenient time and be required to go out and look at a piece of equipment that does not feel or sound right. These calls are always at night or on a weekend. Everyone can tell stories about getting a call at the 'wrong' time. Mine was when I was having dinner on my fifteenth wedding anniversary, and my biggest client called and wouldn't take 'NO' for an answer.

The fourth biggest complaint we hear is about the lack of formal training. "There is no money for training," they are told. "But how can I do my job if they will not train me?" Training does not have to be formal, and most of mine has been on my own. Yes, I have had all the training classes that the Vibration Institute offers; however, many hours were spent on my own talking to people and "picking their minds" or "brainstorming" problems.

Number five – where have all the coaches gone? One of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had was serving as a special teams coach and line coach for our local high school. I never thought there could be a connection between coaching football and a career in vibration. While I no longer coach, most of my old players still call me Coach Guy. I recently ran into a player I hadn't seen in some time. He worked at our company for a few years doing data collection at several of our clients' plants. As we talked, he asked what I was up to and I told that him that I had just gotten back home from giving a Basic Vibrations Class. His response was "So you're still coaching, but only the players have changed."

Then it hit me – all the machinery vibration coaches are either disappearing or retiring. A few years into my career, I was lucky enough to meet someone who helped point me in the right direction. I went to my first formal vibration class six years into my career; Dr. Ron Eshleman, Director of the Vibration Institute, taught a Machinery Vibration Analysis Course in Nashville. And he's been my coach, friend, and mentor

since that class. The other instructor for the class was Charlie Jackson, who just might have coached more vibration technicians and engineers than any one person in the world.

Nelson Baxter and I were wondering recently where are all the new people embarking on vibration careers are coming from. Nelson and I are now at the age where Ron Eshleman and Charlie Jackson were when we were starting out. So now it's up to us and others to carry the torch and coach these new people. With any team, the coach must communicate the game plan. So how is this accomplished?

Anyone who wants a rewarding career must make sacrifices. In reality, there aren't many good career opportunities with a 9-to-5 shift. We have to work when we can accomplish our tasks. All companies are trying to do more with less. Yes, machinery vibration analysis is performed at odd hours, but there are plenty of people in other companies working the same hours or even worse. No one group has the concession on working long or odd hours. We coaches must stress that only time and hard work solves problems – no matter when the work is performed.

Ok, I'll be the first to admit that data collection is boring. But every job is what you make of it. Every one wants to have the glory jobs. In machinery vibration that is the analysis job. But the first part of that job is data collection. Coaches need to stress that it's the most important part of the job. Data collection should not just be gathering data. The technician should be observing the data as it is collected for abnormalities or patterns and noting these observations for the analysis process.

Additionally, the coach needs to stress the importance of a plan for data collection and analysis. One doesn't just walk up to a piece of equipment and start taking data. A formal plan, whether collecting data on a monitoring route or for a problem analysis, must be completed thoroughly and thoughtfully.

Working long hours is not just the province of machinery vibration analysts. Our jobs are to take care of equipment – we are equipment doctors. Doctors are called into hospitals at odd hours, so we can expect similar calls. If you do not want call-outs or any calls at all, then you have to question your value to the organization. Getting a call means you are an asset to your company, and companies value assets. An

asset does not have to mean equipment or working capital. The most important assets in a company are its people. As coaches, we must constantly tell our team of vibration specialists how much we value the job they do.

Training *does not* have to be formal. While I am an instructor at the Vibration Institute, most of my vibration training has been informal. We coaches have to stress that most training must be done on “your own.” Just attending a class does not necessarily train you to be a vibration specialist. This is one of the many misconceptions of those who enter the training classroom. They assume that all elements that need to be known to do vibration work or to pass a certification test are covered in the class. This is not true. Experience is required that cannot be gained in a classroom.

Each vibration specialist has to work on his or her own and develop his or her own personnel training needs and library. If you want to become proficient in this field, then you must work on your own. No one sits in a training class and learns every item that you need for your job. Teachers, trainers, coaches, while giving some basic knowledge, they really provide direction to their charges. This allows their team, players, or students a way to learn on their own.

Much too often I hear, “I don’t have time to learn on my own.” In today’s work

environment, we all must make ourselves better assets to our companies. If you don’t want to work on your personal development, it’s doubtful that you’ll be successful in any life-long career, and your importance to a company will be limited.


If you’re looking for a role model, the name Robby Shumate comes to mind. I met Robby about 14 years ago when he was just starting out in vibration analysis. Robby attended an in-house training class I taught at his utility. I learned back then that Robby was a journeymen millwright, and we crossed paths again this year when I assisted with a vibration problem at his plant. Since that first class, he has attended no other vibration training. But Robby is one of the best vibration analysts I have ever met. His command of situations and requirements for analyzing problems are first rate. All of his knowledge has been gained on his own, developing many good techniques for balancing turbines. He is not yet certified, but his plan is to pay for his own certification. The reason to do it on his own is nothing more than to achieve a goal he has set for himself. He is a good example of someone a company cannot do without – a true company asset making it on his own.

We are the teachers, motivators and coaches. It is our responsibility to help future vibration specialists. We must ex-

plain the rewards of our work. Show why data collection is so important and the pitfalls of not doing it correctly. The rewards of this job come from the time invested – long hours of monitoring lead to good, reliable equipment. This, coupled with showing we all must set personal goals that only we can achieve, and the reward for this job comes from within. It’s not done for a pat on the back but because vibration specialists correct problems that no one else can. That is our reward.

I want to formally thank *my* coaches: Dr. Ron Eshleman, who has been a close friend and mentor for more than 20 years; and Charlie Jackson, whose friendship, direction, and humor have kept me straight and knowing that a well-installed, high-quality piece of equipment outlasts one that’s inexpensive and poorly installed.

I’d also like to thank Jerry Piskorowski, who during a job interview in 1979 saw something in a college graduate that met the needs of a vibration monitoring program he was starting at Public Service Indiana. If not for Jerry, my other coaches would not have had someone to teach, train, direct, and motivate.

To coaches who take unseasoned individuals and turn them on to a career in vibration – industry thanks you. 

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