

Stephen F. Rudy, CEF

Enequist Chemical Co.
100 Varick Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11237
718/497-1200
E-mail: sfrudy@aol.com



Training is an Investment that Builds Experience

Every finishing supplier strives to develop and market top flight products that are cost effective, environmentally compliant, meet industry specifications, are user friendly, and build on their good reputation. Likewise, finishers not only desire, but also require the optimum products, processes, and services, to meet ever stringent demands. Finishers and suppliers comprise the bulk of our industry. Their needs and focus are intrinsically blended.

A critical link to how we all manage and produce is experience. Being an on going process, experience builds on the investment of time. People make things happen. They are the life blood of the metal finishing industry. We are the measure of how successful finishers and suppliers are. Our progress is a gauge of how strong the industry pulse is. People power makes things happen. Training fuels the experience. Because training and experience are so important to how we proceed and succeed, lets review some resources and capabilities available.

Professional Organizations

AESF, NAMF, MFSA, are working to blend their resources under one group. Each organization provides educational opportunities to the industry. By checking the Web sites, there are specific courses, texts, proceedings, seminars, and related updates available. The magic of computerization permits instant access by means of downloading. It also makes convenient the texts in CD ROM formats. Lecture series are broken down into various areas of expertise. These include surface preparation, plating, electroless deposition, post treatments, and a host of compliance issues that include waste treatment, packaging and shipping, safety, and OSHA regulations. Availability in several languages gives these educational tools an international flavor. AESF, long established as an educational focused society, has a strong base of available information. Industry professionals have combined their years of practical experience in developing

these educational resources. Updates are continually made, keeping us current to a host of finishing subjects, and introducing us to new systems and processes. Regional meetings offer speakers that will enlighten specific subjects, encouraging feedback. Likewise, educational pursuits can be achieved through a variety of applications. These include courses and expositions. Home study kits meet the needs of professionals who travel and have busy work schedules. These are offered and maintained by the above organizations and independent, certified schools. AESF and other finishing related societies also hold annual practical schools, on a local level. SUR/FIN and related expositions also include training sessions and courses. Units of credit can be achieved, leading to various degrees of certification. Licensing can also be conferred for specialized operations, such as waste treatment.

Suppliers (Vendors)

How can the finisher implement any processes or recommendations if the supplier isn't up to speed? That is where this industry group is so important. Suppliers are comprised of folks that have experience as finishers and those who have not previously been finishers. The expected "A to Z" knowledge packs a lot of information. Suppliers associate closely with finishers. Astute observations are meshed with technical expertise to build levels of confidence that enable suppliers to analyze, troubleshoot, develop, and modify the products and processes they offer. Lets check some factors affecting the training of suppliers as an investment, building with experience.

Getting in on the ground floor, a new associate will spend considerable time learning the basics of the finishing industry. Most will have some educational and previous job-related experience that will enhance or supplement this process. Seasoned veterans will facilitate the learning process in innumerable ways, based on years of experience. The professional organizations and the previous subject

breakdown are heavily implemented. Metal finishing processes will be covered, perhaps focusing more on certain aspects, designed to enhance specialization. Practical lab work would include analysis and recommendations for process baths, with the emphasis on understanding the why and how. Products are broken down into understanding the functions of the raw materials and how they and other products interact. Introductory criteria is gradually ramped up to include intermediate levels of challenge. After perhaps a year or so, the associate has attained sufficient technical background and expertise to begin more direct contact with the finisher. This now institutes a new performance level. A form of "cross pollination" occurs. Learning "in the trenches" supplements what has been covered in house. The finisher would expose the supplier to actual conditions with pertinent information. Using experience and intuition, consulting with associates, the supplier will meet the challenge as presented, resolving it accordingly. It seems this will now happen on a continual basis as the years go by. The finisher acknowledges the positive ramifications of recommendations and troubleshooting. Confidence builds as the base of knowledge expands. This leads the supplier to a fork in the road. One direction leads to research and product development. The other leads to technical service and associated field liaison work. The long term investment in the associate allows them to contribute towards the education and experience of new personnel. This coming to full cycle maintains the credibility and performance expertise that suppliers must provide.

Metal Finishers (Job & Captive)

These folks have a really challenging business. On one hand quality and cost competition, and on the other meeting a large sphere of environmental and safety compliance. I give them a lot of credit for their business acumen and operational savvy. Many shops and installations are family-owned businesses. Several are fortunate

to have siblings enthusiastic to invest their professional careers to learn the business and take active partnership or ownership.

Similar to the suppliers, the finishers learn the trade from the ground up. They have the benefit of also tapping into the professional and educational programs and information offered by the technical and educational societies described previously. Practical experience and in depth process knowledge is typically geared to the actual finishing operations accomplished. It is not so much as the "nuts and bolts," or theory, as the actual hands on work that is of paramount importance.

New associates may already have been exposed to specific processes. If not, day one leads into day two, and so on. The technique of barrel or rack plating may lead to experience that results in mastering certain intricacies. Careful observation fosters a sense of acknowledging impending problems. This, in turn, develops an effective response to alleviate or prevent trouble. The bottom line to this example and all facets for the finisher revolve around minimizing rejects while operating in a cost effective way.

As the associate progresses, training and experience will expand to all areas of

the shop or operation. The supplier also is important to developing the skills of the finisher. Suppliers may conduct practical workshops for the finisher. These seminars focus on all facets of the general subject matter, seasoning with a proprietary touch. Proprietary systems consist of specific operating parameters, recommendations of use, related troubleshooting, and effective maintenance. The finisher develops an understanding of the processes, maintaining their proper performance.

As experience builds, the finisher will recommend practical suggestions that may lead to modifications, thus making the process operate better. Or, perhaps helping determine that switching to an alternate process or system would be appropriate. Field trials of new products or their modifications always involve the finisher, to acknowledge their evaluation and constructive comments. New product development may be a response to what the finisher needs or must evolve or transition to. The well rounded finisher becomes an important asset to the shop. Management on all levels, associate ownership, or purchasing the business outright may occur as a result of invested training and experience.

General Options

Training and experience is offered by many additional educational outlets. Some are private institutions holding regional classes, usually one or two days, awarding CEUs (continuing education units) or certificates. These include courses that improve business skills (accounting, finance, bookkeeping, inventory, etc.), computer science, chemistry, electronics, equipment repair, handling of hazardous materials, waste management, shipping and related regulations.

Others may be local or community colleges that offer semester courses, giving a more rigorous treatment of the subject matter. Completion of more than one course may lead to state or federal certification. Or, a compilation of subjects may result in a standard college degree.

The importance of training and experience cannot be highlighted enough. Our industry would not function properly if knowledgeable people were not constantly groomed. However, there is a big IF that defines success. People that constitute the future of our industry begin training today. It is only if they want to, that training will be retained and the daily experience will be remembered. The tools are here. The recipient must be willing. Make 2005 an exceptional year. Invest in your staff! *P&SF*

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