

Headhunting the Traditional Way

Borneo. The mere mention evokes classic tales of exploration and adventure: jungles, exotic plants, tribes, primitive living, head-hunters... It is actually the 3rd largest island in the world (after Greenland and New Guinea) and is split between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Sultanate of Brunei. The provinces of Sabah and Sarawak form East Malaysia to the north and were former British colonial states prior to the formation of Malaysia in 1963. As a young philatelist, I often wondered where Sarawak was – now I know!

Head hunting was real and typically a ritual ceremony for various important life transitions; not only for human heads but for animals too. The number of skulls at a warrior's house was indicative of his prowess – the modern-day equivalent is collecting title belts in the UFC! He may also have had to present a head in order to prove himself a worthy husband for a prospective bride. In any event, it was actually not that long ago that it died out – reports exist from the early 20th century and even during World War II.

When you enter the village of a head-hunter, the chief meets the leader of your group and lays a hand on his shoulder to ask why you are there. If the answer meets with his approval, you are welcome. If not, beware! Keep your hands out of your pockets, not behind your back so they can see you have no weapons and they'll treat you as a friend. And let you keep your head.

The jungles of Northern Borneo show few signs of British influence today but are home to a diverse group of indigenous tribes. A tour of their villages provides a fascinating glimpse into the ingenuity and complexity of life in the jungle where bamboo and rice are remarkably



On Friendly Terms with a Local Murut Head-Hunter in Borneo!

important. The bamboo stands enormous and plentiful, providing material not only for constructing houses but also for cooking vessels, baskets, bridges,

ladders, fish traps and all manner of utensils. A demonstration of starting a fire by rubbing two bamboo pieces together is as impressive in simplicity as it is in skill.

Life can be tough in the jungle but communities come together in large houses where celebrations of dancing and music are held. And as we've found in almost every indigenous community around the world we've visited, people find a way to make alcohol from their local staples (go figure). The Irish have their potatoes for poteen and in the case of the Murut, it is rice to make a wine called tapai. For those with greater fortitude, they've even developed ways (using bamboo, of course) to distill the tapai and make hard liquor. At some level, we're all the same whether we live in the metropolis or the jungle.

Headhunting the Modern Way

Unemployment numbers have been heading downwards – generally good news for the economy but not necessarily for business. The recent changes in the US figures are influenced heavily by a shift towards part-time work, seasonal work and the underlying number of people participating in the workforce so the headline data may not be entirely accurate. They do, however, reflect the reality faced by many manufacturers: finding skilled workers in certain markets is almost impossible (managers and engineers are like hen's teeth) and rising rates for semi-skilled workers is hurting productivity before it even hurts margins as they cannot fully staff their operations. The ability to find and keep good staff is perhaps the most common complaint I have heard recently from rotomolders – in all markets. The frustration and expense of finding people, training them and then losing them within a short period (sometimes within their first shift!) is a drain not just on finances but also on the morale of existing staff.

There are parts of the world such as the Middle East where staff retention is less of a problem. Foreign staff can be bound to companies almost as indentured workers – as close to slavery in the modern age as it comes – where their passports are held and they are unable to leave until a debt for travel and visas has been paid. However, the rest of the world has to compete for staff in an open market and that's where the problem can start for rotomolding.

Rotomolding is not easy work. Heat is the primary problem, of course, but the level of detail demanded from rotomolding operators is also rising as product quality and complexity increase. It's not impossible to find people who are willing to do heavy, semi-skilled work but the rates of pay that many molders offer is close to the minimum offered in most areas and those with the motivation will find alternate work in a friendlier environment.

The process lends itself to the young: a group with changing needs in what they demand from work. There are no magic bullets in attracting the right people but there are some basic areas that can help in your hunt. Pay must be competitive, of course, and you need to stay abreast of changing conditions in your local market but involvement and feeling part of a larger movement can be more important. Startups in tech and new products thrive with the enthusiasm of millennials when the business goal aligns with their vision of the world. Can you align your rotomolding operation and

your vision with their interests?

Accept the fact that they will more than likely be with you for only a short period – sweating on a platform in 100°F+ heat is not a long-term career choice. Make it an upfront exchange of their commitment for 2-3 years in return for teaching them a skillset that they can transfer to future positions either with your company or another: computing, troubleshooting, lean manufacturing principles, etc.

Can you improve working conditions? Air conditioned rotomolding operations are few and far between but you can chill the work air around the platform and provide areas for respite during excessively hot periods. Take some of the heavy lifting out of the process: powder vacuum transfer, articulated molds, safe working platforms with good access to the molds, design mold handling procedures for large products that are safe. Make sure that supervision is responsive and that operators have constant feedback and feel that their input is valued.

The ability to attract and retain people will be based on the company culture and environment you create. Word spreads when this is positive just as fast as when it is negative. Happy hunting! **R**

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