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Rotomolding Transforming?

Change is in the air for rotomolding: costs; demographics; access to information.

Not for everyone, however. Just as in the real world, there is a distinct and increasing separation between standard molders and those at the top end – the one-percenters? Well maybe 5-10%. There is a huge group of molders around the world for whom the low-cost, short-run appeal of rotomolding will always be sufficient to make a good living. The molds, machines, even the approach to design has not changed for 30-40 years in much of the rotomolding industry – only the competition and regulations have intensified. They either feel no need to invest in or adopt cutting edge technology. They may even find it impossible to apply it to their processes or markets due to product volumes, lack of technical ability or end-user expectations.

At the most fundamental level, the industry is connected to oil prices and with major world powers seeking to maintain higher prices, we may not see all the relief promised by the extra capacity currently coming on-stream in the US and Asia. With material sometimes constituting 50-60% of part cost, passing on increases in a low inflation environment can prove difficult.

Rising labor costs and employee expectations are perhaps finally catching up with rotomolding - certainly in the West but in other regions too. Long characterized as labor intensive, rotomolding has always been flexible and appealing to the entrepreneurial spirit. Cheap, readily available labor has made it easy to operate and for decades has somewhat protected the rotomolding industry from the need to change. Now, the world has caught up with dropping birthrates in many regions and a smaller workforce – the industry is having to transform in some places just to survive – you can't make parts when people don't show. Is rotomolding destined to be a process for low-cost locations only or can it be redesigned to work where labor costs can be prohibitive?

The Autobots Really Do Exist!

With relatively low unemployment and increasing demands from employees for work-life balance and work environments, even low-cost regions such as South-East Asia and Africa are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain people. People simply have more choices and, with the advent of the smart-phone, can see what is possible just over the horizon. Job hopping is not good for employee or employer alike but may be a life saver when you earn subsistence wages.

Hence the cry for automation and reduction of labor. Can we build robots and machines that completely automate the process from mold-filling to part-extraction and part-trimming? Do flexible robots, or 'cobots' like the Autobots exist? Of course. Well maybe not that sophisticated just yet, but for most molders (and projects), applying the latest available technology will not be easy or justifiable. The lucky few

with a high-volume product line or corporate resources will implement what they can; there may even be newcomers from other industries setting up facilities who bring fresh perspective and resources (and no bad habits).

So what are the vast majority of molders to do? As always, focus first on the operator load/unload station. You typically don't have to spend a lot to make the work environment more efficient and worker friendly with a few simple changes. Machine energy efficiency is interesting, faster cycles may help (but not always), high tech temperature measuring is always good but paying attention to operator workload and safety is the real key. One of the best solutions of late is powder handling on the platform with low-cost and compact solutions such as RotoLoad from Paladin Sales making it easy to implement. Take a look at how you handle your parts: is it safe, ergonomic and efficient? How are your platforms or methods for access to molds designed: do they really protect workers? Can you improve lighting? It is tough to make quality parts in the dark. I often spend as much time in factories discussing better, safer work practices than solving mold problems or analyzing cycles. It is remarkable how many dark, unbearably hot, dusty and unsafe rotomolding facilities there are in the world – even in the West. However, convincing some owners that there is a correlation between profits and employee satisfaction is not always easy – transformation often needs to begin at the top.

10,000 Days

On a final note to end the year, Orla and I met on 8-Jul-1984 – that's 33 years together so far or 12,202 days. We often sit down and plan ahead for travel, family, investments, business plans, careers, etc. but as I looked at our next set of plans and our ages, the reality of being on the downside of our time together really struck home.

If we make it to 80 years old (a worthy target, typical life expectancy in the US), we would have about another 10,000 days together.

10,000 days. That is not really a lot of time, but it can be enough if we make it count. We decided that we would start to count the days to make sure that we appreciate every single one of them as best we can. Every morning we start with the number and what we plan to do. Plan to be productive, be happy and move towards our goals. We want to look forward in life so we don't have to look back in regret. Our simple guide to appreciate life.

What will you do with the rest of your time? Day 9908.