

We all need someone to lean on

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If you know the answer, there's never been a better time to solve the manufacturer's eternal question: how do I save money? If the answer is in the principles of Lean, then how do you build your career on them?

The exchange rate means that manufacturing things in the UK looks like a good idea (almost. And for the first time in over a decade.)

However, while the exchange rate won't stay as it is forever, efficient manufacturing (see panel, right), simply will not go out of vogue. But how do you embark on a career in engineering efficiency and once there, how do you ensure continual progress?

There are very few degree courses that actually include a serious lean manufacturing, Six Sigma (yup, look at that panel again) or business process management (BPM - ditto) element.

There is a valid reason for this; 'engineering' represents a huge and increasingly fragmented spectrum. For any course to include too much depth on any one discipline would result in an imbalance elsewhere. However, this does leave some students wondering 'where next' if they hope for a career plan that is supposed to culminate with a job in lean manufacturing.

So where should you turn if this is your objective? With little opportunity to get experience before your first job, are you facing a Catch 22 situation?

Commercial know-how

It seems not, as Greg Watts, from lean consultancy The Improvement Practice explains; "Graduates should aim to get some form of business management experience as part of their degree. Then get their first job and attempt to progress upwards toward a manufacturing manager role. It's crucial that they avoid getting stuck in a particular technical specialism, though; they need to get as much experience in different areas of the business as possible. Commercial understanding is the key."

Watts argues that the next step, after spending some time in-house at a manufacturer, should be to move into consultancy. Once there you should seize the opportunity to experience as many different challenges as possible.

However, according to Martyn Heath of Top Q Management Services, it's not just the challenge but your approach to it which is essential for progress.

"Sometimes the reality of a manufacturing efficiency project is very different from the theory," explains Heath. "You have to be flexible because occasionally the theory just doesn't work. Maybe the people aren't ready for it, or the systems aren't ready for it. When this happens you have to be creative and develop something different that works. It's all about independent thinking."

Other routes

However, this route isn't the only potential culmination of a career in manufacturing efficiency. In fact, there is evidence that you don't have to stick to the corporate path for your entire career at all.

Daniel James Paterson graduated from the University of Nottingham in 2003 with a degree in mechanical engineering and then worked for Parker Hannifin in a number of lean roles. He is now founder of HumanitarianManufacturing.org and ManufacturingChange.org, a crowd-sourced NGO that will support organisations in developing countries that generate social change through manufacturing.

"The key to being successful in process improvement is the ability to deeply understand Value Streams and the people within them," he says. "For recent graduates hoping for a BPI (business process improvement)/Lean career, I'd recommend that they perform a substantial amount of deep Value Stream Mapping, in a variety of different process types, and that they find an experienced mentor to guide them. This will allow them to convince potential employers that they can find the small changes that will significantly improve

a process – and most importantly, that they have the ability to convince process managers and operators to make the changes!”

Little by little

It seems clear that attitude is the key to pursuing a role in lean, a view supported by Kalen Fitch, 27, who graduated from Penn State University in 2006. “What I have found easiest was to not look for a continuous improvement position, but rather to incorporate LEAN in every aspect of the position I am currently in,” he explains.

“I think what you will hear from most young engineers is that initially all continuous improvement is done on their own time. Most employers and managers realise the value of continuous improvement, but need to see the results before they can start dedicating time to it. I think one of the key attributes is the willingness to go above and beyond your job responsibilities, to begin growing a continuous improvement culture both in yourself and the others around you,” he concludes.

So, while manufacturing is still a viable career, it is possible that lean isn’t necessarily on the agenda of all manufacturers. However, like all fundamentally good ideas, it will prove itself when applied; the key is finding an employer willing to allow this to happen. So, whether you take a lean-specific job, prove the position’s value while in another role or are already at the stage of your career where a consultancy job is right for you, self motivation is the crux of the issue.

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