The missing ingredient to plant launch success

As plant launches continue to move at an accelerated pace, it is extremely important to ensure the appropriate pieces and personnel are in place and properly equipped for success. Obvious aspects of plant launch and expansion projects include creating a design, ensuring the appropriate infrastructure is in place and hiring all personnel for operations, maintenance, management, etc. However, one critical element is often overlooked in the planning stages that can severely impact an on-time and safe start-up. That element is to make sure the personnel hired to operate the plant are trained, competent, compliant and ready to take over plant operation. So the question is, “Where and how do you collect the required training information in order to ensure regulatory compliance and a safe working environment at start-up?”

Whether you use an in-house training department, corporate support, an outside vendor or a mixture of the three, one factor remains the same: the need for subject matter experts (SMEs). The challenge is during many plant launches experienced operators are not available to pass along site-specific knowledge, especially when a site has customized processes that are not well documented. This leaves gaps in knowledge that may only be locked away in the minds of the design engineers. So why is that a problem? When the timeline is already down to the wire and training and documentation have become the critical path, the individuals required to provide this information are spending most of their waking hours ensuring the plant design is complete and carried out successfully. As a result, training material development lags and operators do not have the resources needed to be trained and fully competent to perform their job roles with 100-percent effectiveness.

There are three keys to improve the success of plant launch training and documentation programs without overwhelming all involved:

- Schedule appropriate time for SMEs.
- Start development early.
- Facilitate documentation reviews.

Schedule appropriate time for SMEs

Initially, SME time will be required to provide and clarify the relevant information to the training specialist or technical writer/developer regarding what needs to be taught. Additional SME review time will be required once draft materials are created. Accounting for this SME time when assembling the staffing plan in the project planning phase can give a more realistic expectation of resources needed based on workload, which will help meet the overall project timeline.

Start development early

A common trap is the following mindset: “All will be well as long as procedures, process documentation and training are in place by the time a plant starts up.” Using this philosophy will not generate any information to train and qualify the personnel who will actually start and run the plant. Starting development early can be challenging. Gaps might still exist in some areas, and changes to the plant design could occur. To mitigate these issues, create base documentation that can be updated as the project progresses. This requires a commitment from stakeholders and a plan in place to update the materials as soon as the information is available. Doing so provides a more secure project timeline and lowers the stress of the SMEs.

An additional benefit of early documentation development is discovering gaps in information while SMEs and training experts are working together. When these discoveries are identified early in your process, schedules can be adjusted to meet the newly identified demand.

Facilitate documentation reviews

It can be very easy to fall behind on reviewing training documentation with the competing priorities that almost all SMEs face. When review of developed materials is planned and scheduled, the SME will have time to evaluate documents and work with the documentation developer to align on any changes needed. This facilitated review can be brief, but it provides the opportunity to ensure understanding between the knowledge holder (SME) and the training developer, which increases document quality.

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