Never too old to learn

Sometimes life throws you curveballs. Here’s why there is no shame in training for a second career.

By Bill O’Leary, EA Associate Editor

According to neurologist Harold Chugani, head of the PET Center at the Children’s Hospital of Michigan, by the age of 4, a child’s brain is more than twice as active as an adult’s. The brain continues to consume glucose at an increased pace through age 10 until it levels off at adult values.

Bad news for anybody who just read that. The good news is that although the adult brain is less active than a child’s, it does maintain the ability to learn until death if the individual remains healthy.

Typically, most learning occurs at grade school, high school, potentially college and graduate school and so on into one’s 20’s as a person enters the workforce. The classroom instruction then morphs into occupational training that utilizes the same portions of the brain. What happens when a plant closes and those laid off are out of options when it comes to a particular field? What happens when the technology around you evolves past the point of understanding?

Here, we’ll follow the experiences of those in the industry who had to change gears and return to school to learn a new trade. Also, we’ll see how one man not only continued to sharpen his skills but acquired a new one that most of us take for granted.

Back to school

What happened to Gits Manufacturing was not unique or shocking when you look at the current economic landscape. The reality did not make it any less devastating to employees of the manufacturer of airflow management products and lubrication devices for diesel engines, and pumps.

In mid-September 2013, the company decided to close its Creston, Iowa, plant and move all of its operations to Juarez, Mexico, and Taicang Jiangsu, China. The decision resulted in the loss of 78 jobs, with the final stage of terminations occurring in June 2014.

“We were all shocked and kind of hoping that things would work themselves out,” said Brian Helm, an assembler and TIG welder at Gits for three-and-a-half years. “Gits had such a low turnover rate, and so many of the employees had been there 20-40 years.”

The Creston plant was considered a fixture of the community since 1945, at one time employing more than 120 manufacturing employees. Now, those former employees had to pick up the pieces and move forward. The problem was that “forward” consisted of a number of avenues and detours.

Luckily, Southwestern Community College (SWCC) was there to provide guidance.

SWCC is a public, two-year community college with a main campus in Creston, Iowa, and remote centers in Red Oak and Osceola, Iowa. It offers a variety of career and technical education degrees and an industrial maintenance technology program that appeared to be a good fit for the Creston workers.

With this in mind, school administrators, along with Union County Development and IowaWORKS, a workforce development group that helps employers find skilled workers, held a couple of rapid response meetings for Gits management and employees. SWCC’s organizers included Terri Higgins, director of marketing and enrollment management; Caitlyn Lesan, admissions coordinator; and Bill Hunnington, technical recruiter.

“These people had really been dealt a bad hand in life, and they were sitting in silence at these meetings, probably thinking ‘what am I going to do next?’” said Higgins. “Eventually they all loosened up and started asking a lot of questions about technology. They knew whatever field they went into they would probably have to take a number of classes that included technology they weren’t used to. There were people that admitted they didn’t even have a computer at home and they were wondering if SWCC offered a course to teach them how to use a mouse.”

One of the main goals for these meetings, held at the Creston facility, was to present workers with their unemployment options and the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program. TAA is a federal program that provides aid to
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U.S. workers who have lost their jobs as a result of foreign trade.

Those workers who have lost their job in this manner first have to file a petition with the U.S. Dept. of Labor, which determines whether foreign trade was a cause of the actual job loss or wage reduction. If the petition is approved, affected workers can apply to their State Workforce Agency for TAA benefits and services that include job training, income support, and job search and relocation allowances.

Higgins and the SWCC team then conducted a campus tour for 10-15 former Gits employees and offered the opportunity to go back to school. The benefit here is that they could take a two-year program to earn a degree or certification and quickly re-enter the workforce. Eight former Gits employees ended up enrolling in SWCC for the fall 2014 semester.

Helm joined SWCC’s industrial maintenance technology program that prepares students for careers in manufacturing and production facilities. It teaches students how to troubleshoot and repair industrial equipment ranging from basic mechanical equipment and motor controls to complex systems used in manufacturing environments.

Students also learn how to use digital electronic equipment, including programmable logic controllers, to troubleshoot and repair electrical motor controls and electrical equipment, and to diagnose and repair industrial hydraulic and pneumatic systems.

His first choice was to find another job as an assembler, but he was intrigued by the possibility of attending college for the first time as he was hired by Gits out of high school. It certainly helped that the TAA paid his tuition and books. Many of Helm’s fellow employees shared his initial reticence about returning to school.

“There were a few employees in their mid- to late-40’s who just didn’t want to go school because they were older and didn’t think they could learn,” he said.

There may be some embarrassment or fear of returning to school, but older students, or “nontraditional” students as they are often called, have a number of advantages over their younger classmates.

Many times, these nontraditional students are the best students in their class,” said Higgins. “They’ve been out there working and part of them is scared because they know their family is depending on them to complete a program and earn an income as soon as they can. They’re going to take their classes a lot more seriously.”

Time allocation is a major concern, especially if the student has a family. There’s a lot more for them to juggle now than the last time they were at school, when they may not have had a spouse and children. How do you balance homework with familial responsibilities? Nontraditional students often have to go through an extended adjustment period.

They also face challenges like the aforementioned change in technology. Many of these students’ first go-around probably did not include computers or tablets. Differences in slang, fashion, and general attitude could ignite a culture clash between older and younger students. As a result, nontraditional students may feel isolated or awkward around the “traditional” students since they are by their very definition the exception and not the rule.

Helm did not feel this way, and now in the midst of the program, he has no regrets about his decision. He had always been a “technical guy” who liked working with his hands, and the program caters to his preferences. In class, they work with electrical boards, run motor starters, and program PLCs.

After completing the first year of the program, Helm wanted to put his industrial maintenance training to real-world use. With the help of Pam Varner, business and employment services specialist at IowaWORKS, Helm sent out his résumé (now with the SWCC course additions) to employers in the region and was quickly hired by May to intern in the maintenance department for Ferrara Candy Co. He plans to complete the industrial maintenance program after finishing his internship and hopes to get a job as a PLC technician.

“This whole process has definitely given me more appreciation for school,” said Helm. “I didn’t get the best grades in high school or put forth as much effort I should have. Having a career, losing that career, and returning to school has made me care more about education. Now I have a 3.75 GPA.”

From material handling to robotics

David Williams was another casualty of a plant closing where operations had been moved out of the country. Since 1978, he worked at Whirlpool Corp. in Fort Smith, Ark., as a materials handler, putting liners, drains, and screw anchors in refrigerators. In June of 2012, the plant shut down and relocated operations to a new facility in Ramos Arizpe, Mexico, leaving 825 employees jobless. The impact extended to Whirlpool material suppliers and vendors, adding more than 500 people to the unemployment tally and causing a labor income reduction of $61 million.

The manufacturing sector in this area has been taking hits for a while
now. According to a 2012 economic outlook report from The University of Arkansas–Fort Smith’s Center for Business Research and Economic Development, Sebastian County’s manufacturing employment declined by more than 20% from 2007 to 2010, a reduction of almost 18,000 to approximately 14,000.

In the fall of 2012, Williams did not return to manufacturing. He went to college and studied robotics.

“I was looking into classes at the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith and robotics sounded really interesting,” said Williams, who also received aid from TAA. “I had read about how there are more and more opportunities in robotics these days and decided to give it a shot. The more I got into the course, the more I enjoyed it.”

Robotics Technology is an introductory course where students develop hands-on skills such as installing and maintaining a robot system. It also teaches students how to use computers to design and implement robot programming projects. The course consists of three classes and can be applied towards an Associate of Applied Science degree.

The University of Arkansas–Fort Smith developed the course after noticing that many businesses in the state had been using robotics but there were no trained and certified technicians to operate them. After receiving a Robotics Technology Certificate of Proficiency, graduates can serve as technicians in electrical maintenance, plant maintenance, industrial robotics, and medical robotics.

Williams’s favorite part of the course is programming the robot, and he brought over his experience working with robots for ice makers at Whirlpool. The transition was not completely seamless, though.

“The robots we use in this class have a greater degree of freedom and can perform a lot more functions than the ones I used at Whirlpool,” he said. “They’re definitely more sophisticated than the ones I used at Whirlpool.”

Williams went straight from high school to the in-house training at Whirlpool, so college was a completely fresh experience. There is one other student in the class who is around his age, but everybody else is between 20 and 30 years old. He doesn’t seem to mind, though, as some of the younger guys are “smart and a lot of fun.” Although they do catch on to certain topics faster than he does.

Williams spent 25 years in the manufacturing field, from janitor and expeditor to his current position as environmental, health, and safety trainer. Yet for years he carried a secret—he couldn’t read.

Both of Goldsmith’s parents were deaf and he knew sign language more than anything else. He could hardly speak when he started school, and his teachers had difficulty communicating with him. This was compounded by the fact he is completely deaf in his left ear.

The teachers at my grade school suggested that my parents get a television to help me with speaking to others,” Goldsmith said. “We were dirt poor but my parents did the best they could. They bought me a TV, stuck me in front of it, and I’ve been there watching Star Trek ever since.”

He moved from Kansas City, Mo., to Greenwood, Ark., in the sixth grade. None of his teachers knew he was illiterate, and he developed elaborate ways to hide it, “tricks” as he calls them. For example, when doing his homework, he would pick out a word in the question and find a word that looked like it in the textbook. Then, he would copy all the text around that particular word. This led to great grades on the homework but he failed the tests. He simply couldn’t read the questions.

After completing the 12th grade, Goldsmith spent 25 years in the machine shop at Baldor. He was able to get by watching other machinists, training for the job in a visual and hands-on fashion. He also took his “tricks” with him to the workplace.

Randy Goldsmith (left), environmental health and safety trainer at Baldor Electric, receiving his industrial safety and health certificate of program completion from Paul Schlumper, safety engineering supervisor and principal research engineer, at Georgia Institute of Technology. Goldsmith hopes to eventually receive a degree in safety.

—Photo by Myrtle Turner, OSHA Training Institute Education Center Director

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“If the person I was watching on a machine wasn’t there, often times they’d write me a note,” he said. “I would rewrite that note really sloppy and go up to somebody else at the shop and say ‘hey, I can’t read this guy’s writing—can you?’”

Goldsmith kept his secret from coworkers and bosses for 13 years. He learned quickly on the job and was considered very personable, but he would turn down opportunities as a coordinator, supervisor, or even an area manager out of fear that people would find out he couldn’t read.

It was the presence of the Literacy Council of Western Arkansas at the facility’s cafeteria that gave him the courage to open up. He first spoke about it with Merle Bradley, former HR manager at the Fort Smith plant and currently the corporate HR manager. Bradley helped set up a tutoring session with the Literacy Council, a non-profit organization that teaches basic reading, writing, and math skills to adult students.

Goldsmith was tutored three times a week for approximately two years. Then he went on to get his GED, taking adult education and computer classes at the plant, which were provided by the University of Arkansas. Along the way, he always had support from coworkers and higher-ups at Baldor.

“Roland Boreham and John McFarland, who both had served as chairman of the board and CEO in the past, would come by my machine constantly and ask how I was doing with my reading and if there was anything they could do to help,” he said. “These are people in the corporate office who would come over and would take the time to encourage instead of belittle me. They didn’t have to do that.”

Since completing the tutoring sessions, Goldsmith, in his mid-30s, was able to make presentations and learn more about the equipment because he could read manuals. He could also read his Bible, which held precious weight to him.

The impact of these one-on-one sessions was so positive that he decided to use his new skills to help others. He became a board member of the Literacy Council and began tutoring two coworkers at the Fort Smith plant.

“I tutored a coworker who was older than me for about two years,” said Goldsmith. “He came up to me one morning—face and eyes blood red—and he had this little piece of paper in his hand. He said ‘I went home. My wife and daughter were gone so I started doing some work around the house. My wife came back and asked me if I read her note. She knew that I was working on my reading with Randy and she thought it would be great practice. I went over to the refrigerator, took the note off, and for the first time in my life I could read something that was written for me.’”

It was one of the greatest moments of Goldsmith’s life as far as teaching. “It was a simple note, about 13-15 words,” he added. “But it was the most valuable thing he’s ever had. He read it out loud to me and we both started crying. There we were, two grown men crying at work.”

Further cementing this transition, he began teaching motivational classes, safety training, and programming to Baldor employees. Today, Goldsmith travels the country, teaching environmental health and safety to attendees with PhDs at Baldor and parent company ABB.

He owes it all to an insatiable hunger for knowledge.

“If there is a class I can take, I’ll take it,” he said. It’s a tough thing to admit you can’t read, but I’ve had people come up to me and say ‘If you can start when you started and accomplish the things you’ve accomplished, then I need to be willing to make a start too,’ either by going to college or learning a new skill. The biggest thing is having the courage to take the first step.”

The need to retrain and learn new things is invaluable. The world around us is constantly evolving, and expanding the base of knowledge is needed to keep ahead and remain competent at your job. Remember Brian Helm, currently studying to become a PLC technician? Well, he remembers a former coworker named “Deb,” who was with Gits for about 35 years and is now taking a computer networking class at Southwestern Community College.

“You hear a lot of older people say, ‘Oh I can’t do this because it involves computers,’” he said. “Deb is 65 years old and she’s getting into computer networking. I look at her and think ‘I don’t know if I could do that. I don’t know if I could understand it if I were her.’ But she’s proof that you’re definitely never too old to learn anything.”

There’s always more to learn and there’s little that is more damaging to personal and professional growth than complacency. After all, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.