



Technology or People

By Miles Free – Director of Technology and Industry Research

Technology or people. Which is your focus? It is not a defective question. It does not have a simple answer.

As managers, we have limited cognitive bandwidth, and we choose to focus on one thing, regardless of our insistence that we hold both equally important.

As business people, we have limited resources, so we earmark our spending according to our focus. Technology in our shops is the means to produce the products that we exchange for revenue dollars. The people in our shops are the ones in charge of the machines that produce the products that we exchange for revenue dollars.

In your shop, do your people operate your machines? Do they tend them? Or, do they lead them? In the capability section of your website, do you have a list of high end production equipment?

When we say “technology,” just what is it that we mean? When I say “technology,” I am really thinking “tech-KNOWLEDGE-y,” because it is the “knowledge” of our people that leads our machines to production success.

At HORN’s recent “Technology Days” held at its factories in Tübingen, Germany, the focus was clearly on the advanced technology of their tooling solutions. They make their own toolholders. They formulate and produce their own carbide. They design and grind the geometry needed. They apply their own coatings. Their production technology is impressive at every turn. But to my eye, there was more to the story than the technology.

But what impressed me the most was the implicit, built-in assumptions at HORN that it was the people leading the machine tools, rather than the machine tools leading the people. As impressive as the machines, tools and processes were, all have one thing in common that they rely on: the people.

Like a magician directs our eyes, the HORN Technology Days programs and materials directed us to look at the technology deployed and produced in its factories and examine the sophisticated tooling solutions it produces for our shops so we can make the high value, critical application products that make our modern lives possible.

Underneath the attention given to the technology, the wise observer sees it is the people and the culture that are leading the technology, not the other way around.



The mirror finish on this mono-crystalline diamond-milled part is as much a reflection of the machinist’s leadership of the process as it is about the tools.

Technology or people. Which is in the lead in your shop and your culture?

It seemed pretty clear to me that with the latest technology being readily available for sale around the world, technology is not as strong a differentiator as we might hope. What is a differentiator that cannot be duplicated is the unique value that we have in our people, their “tech-KNOWLEDGE-y,” to lead our machines. Our people are leading our machines. They are not subordinate servants of our machines.

So, technology or people? The explicit response might be technology, but the implicit assumption must be the people, because the machines cannot lead themselves.