

CORRESPONDENCE

DETAILER SHORTAGE FIX

I read with interest the article by J. Russell Sutton entitled "Does anyone want to be a detailer?" There are at least two other solutions to the lack of detailers in the United States, namely Canada and Mexico. These are two huge untapped markets for detailers, both of which offer considerable economical incentives. The Canadian Dollar is about \$0.72 American, and they speak English, other than in Quebec. Their education system is excellent, and the graduates of their schools are eager to work.

Even more economically feasible is Mexico, where a Bachelor's degree-holding engineer or architect can be employed as a detailer apprentice for the same starting salary as a McDonald's worker in the States. Mexican detailers are every bit as capable as their American counterparts, maybe even more so considering that many U.S. detailers begin with only an Associates degree, and sometimes not even with that.

I speak from experience, since I just finished four years as Chief Designer for an American steel fabricator that opened a successful steel fab. plant and detailing office in Mexico from scratch. I developed a training "boot camp" of 12 intensive weeks of training, after which the "graduates" were ready to handle basic detailing, and using a support staff of experienced checkers, were able to perform admirably.

An office in India could also be considered, since English is a common language, and the economy is advantageous. Considering the apparent lack

of interest in the States of bright young people to become detailers, U.S. fabricators must expand to the world market. But one thing is certain, a capital investment is required, and patience must be used; one cannot attain five years of detailing experience in three years, regardless of the training methods used. We can hope, however, to make those initial five years more productive via a positive training program.

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THEIR OWN ENEMY?

I am writing regarding the article by J. Russell Sutton, "Does anyone want to be a detailer?" in your March 2002 issue. As a detailer for over 33 years, of which 17 have been the owner of a 14 man detailing office, I laughed out loud at the quote Mr. Sutton used in his article from Walt Kelly's comic strip - "We have seen the enemy and it is us." No truer words were spoken. Detailers are most certainly their own worst enemies.

I recently advertised for an experienced detailer in both *Modern Steel Construction* and *Engineering News Record* and got one "qualified" response. The remainder of the responses were from detailers working from their homes hoping to sublet through my office.

I do not know what it is about this business that promotes this type of behavior. I run a real business. We have a benefits package equal to or better than most professional corporations. We

have an office second to none. I do everything I can to promote professionalism and yet my average employee sticks around for 3 to 7 years and then teams up with one of his friends, works in their cellar, and becomes my competitor. The sorry thing about this whole situation is they actually get work—plenty of work.

I have been active in both the NISD (National Institute of Steel Detailing) and the NSBA (National Steel Bridge Alliance) and recently resigned my position as Vice President of the Florida Chapter of the NISD. As a matter of fact, the Florida Chapter dissolved due to lack of participation. The NISD has poured untold hours into certification programs and are to be commended. But the truth is that the participation by their own members is less than desirable.

What is the answer? The answers are far too many to address in this letter, but I do know one thing for sure; as long as the structural steel fabrication industry continues to support the "moonlighter," they will continue to exist and so will the self-eroding existence of what was once an art form.

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Modern Steel Construction welcomes reader feedback. Contact either Scott Melnick (melnick@modernsteel.com) or Keith Grubb (grubb@modernsteel.com) with your comments or concerns.