



FABTECH 2022

Talking transformation and talent

Automation, digital transformation and the many dimensions of the talent challenge all shaped the agenda over the course of a busy three days in Atlanta, Georgia in November. Metal formers, fabricators, welders and finishers of every description came together for networking and debate in an industry that's a heavy user of industrial gases and is engaging with a host of familiar manufacturing challenges – and opportunities – that will define the years ahead. **Christian Annesley** was there and picks out the most resonant highlights from a vibrant event spanning 150 conference sessions, 1,200 exhibitors and 500 product launches.

FABTECH 2022 was an expo of many parts, but its conference streams captured the preoccupations of many who attended. There were FABx Tech Talks from some well-known industry leaders in the main theater, plus dozens of dedicated sessions each day in smaller spaces spread across the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta.

What were the big insights and trends? Like every industry, innovation and rapid change is to be seen everywhere in advanced manufacturing and fabrication, together with the growing challenge of finding, nurturing, and keeping talent that is shaping every corner of business today across the US, North America as a whole and further afield. Automation has a key role to play to address the talent shortage.

One notable speaker at the top of the conference was Richard Boyd, who is a tech entrepreneur and expert on AI, machine learning, virtual worlds, computer gaming, and human/computer interfaces.

While not from the fabrication

industry, Boyd's big idea is that technology will help to shape and transform this space like many others in the years to come – and he spoke based on decades of pioneering experience.

Boyd is co-founder and CEO of the artificial intelligence and machine learning company Tanjo AI, and the co-founder and CEO of Ultisim Inc., which is a simulation learning company that utilizes gaming technology and AI.

He has been instrumental in creating several extraordinary computer gaming companies, including Red Storm Entertainment with the author Tom Clancy and Timeline Computer Entertainment with the author Michael Crichton. Boyd also used his expertise in 3D simulation and animation to help the movie directors James Cameron, Brian dePalma, Peter Weir, and Sydney Pollack.

"I formed Tanjo because of the exciting new developments we were seeing in machine learning by 2014. We saw a deep, still largely unrecognized

need, for companies and individuals to achieve a new balance between human and machine effort and intelligence," said Boyd. "Tanjo helps individuals, companies, organizations and governments strike that balance to optimize outcomes. Anyone who is not carefully looking through all of their activities to decide what to turn over to machines and what to keep in the human domain will soon not only not be competitive but will become irrelevant."

Technology, said Boyd, is democratizing fast – and the virtual worlds that can now be created are a kind of superpower for testing ideas that manufacturing needs.

"We have seen the benefit in the film industry for many years now, and the problem-solving that's happened in that space has the capacity to do so much now in so many more contexts. You can develop highly detailed virtual worlds now for learning and more that cost a fraction of the real-world alternative and are far more usable. It is a resource that is starting to be tapped but is ripe for wider use," said Boyd. **gw**

Exploring the challenge of change in manufacturing

On day two of the expo in Atlanta a sold-out panel session entitled **Women of FABTECH** brought together three company heads and a leading consultant to discuss digital marketing strategies, workforce engagement and more for manufacturers today

On the panel

Scarlet Hao, Digital Strategy Consultant, **Accenture** (facilitator and participant).
Shelley Foland, CEO, **Softies**. Lisa Winton, CEO, **Winton Machine Company**.
Holly Gotfredson, President, **American Metalcraft** and President, **Finishing Dynamics**.

Lisa, can I start with you? How have you historically marketed Winton Machine Co and how is your approach evolving?

Lisa Winton At Winton Machine we have undergone a huge transformation in our marketing and presentation as a business. 25 years ago we built a PHP website that carried information on our product range. Fast-forward a quarter of a century and in March 2023 we will launch the fourth iteration of our website.

Every time you undertake an

overhaul like this you learn so much through the process. Content is king, of course, and once again we have put our best foot forward to really try to deliver. We have long invested in expert support, from professional photographers to videographers and more, and the site we are about to roll out really tells our story well, with a lot of strong video content to the fore. We know our customers and would-be customers want to consume good, punchy video content and that's a focus. We use a private Vimeo video channel for our website but also post on

YouTube to keep up our Google rankings.

Shelley Foland

It is interesting to hear about those strategies. One lesson for us at Softies is to lean on experts in relation to content and our content

marketing strategy. There are so many variables that need to be understood, from SEO and keywords to the content planning. Internally we found we just didn't know enough, so using an agency is valuable. It is good to have expertise on hand, particularly as things change so fast. How should we use Instagram? TikTok? So many questions and they just keep on coming.

We experimented with influencers in our B2C apparel markets, which might be useful in some manufacturing markets but not others.

Holly Gotfredson I think it is important as a manufacturer today to position yourself as a resource online rather than doing any hard selling. There is a certain emotional intelligence that is expected when you use social media. As a company, we have explored the psychology of social media and that has opened our eyes to what's possible. You need to understand your audiences and their needs.

Winton It is important to be selective about what you put out, too. ▶



© Fabtech | On the panel



© Butler Photography | Fabtech 2022 Atlanta

► Everyone is getting so many messages today and that makes engagement hard, so you need to focus on relevance and smart timing. That's another reason to lean on analytics and on the experts who can guide a strategy.

Scarlet Hao Yes, as a content marketer I often advise to take a step back when putting out content and asking yourself: what would get my attention? Does a post like this, a video like this, a title like this on this email shot actually make people want to engage? You also have to experiment to an extent, and that's where analytics can guide you and show what is working.

With supply chain and employment challenges being faced by nearly all manufacturers, how do you best navigate that?

Gottfredson The pandemic taught us how to pivot! We had supply chain

issues at that point and had to find alternative sourcing, so that is helping now. We have been through the pain of finding new suppliers so have that in our kitbag now.

Winton Yes, there are still many supply chain issues out there today. In areas of electronics, for example. You need to be prepared to innovate and re-engineer your parts and pieces at times, and our engineers have been very good at doing that and at documenting the changes being made. One way to keep on top of all the challenges in business today is to ensure your company has an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system that is fit for purpose. That helps you stay on top of processes and documentation, for example. We are in the process of bringing in a new ERP system right now, and will make the switchover in April 2023. Having that system in place will help to drive

"We build automation for our customers but have been guilty of not utilizing it enough ourselves"

innovation, automation and process efficiency. The automation side is interesting, in fact. As a business we build automation for our customers but have been guilty of not utilizing it enough ourselves. That is something we now expect to put right, backed by our new ERP.

Marketing doesn't only target customers in 2022, does it? With the current pressure on workforce recruitment and securing talent, is your marketing also focused on ►



**Developing, Manufacturing Service Safe Clean Energy
Storage and Transportation Systems.**

**THERMAL EFFICIENT
STORAGE**



**High Quality
Safe & Reliable**



We create innovation storage and transportation systems.

Copyright © 2022 Acme Cryogenics

www.acmecryo.com

HEATERS FOR CRYOGENIC GASES

- **PRESSURE CAPACITIES TO 5000+ PSI**
- **TEMPS TO 600°C / 1110°F**
- **1 TO 60 KW POWER**



CAST-X
HEATERS

*Heat Flammable Gases
Vaporize Cryogenics*

CASTALUMINUMSOLUTIONS.COM

TEL: (630) 482-5325 • SALES@CASTALUMINUMSOLUTIONS.COM



© Butler Photography | Fabtech 2022 Atlanta

► **potential employees? What tactics are each of you using in this regard and what would you advise companies with urgent hiring needs?**

Winton It recently took us six months to find and hire a mechanical engineer and similarly six months to hire a controls engineer. So I understand this struggle. One way we try to engage with candidates now that's more intimate is by texting, which is more immediate and informal. We are looking for a salesperson right now and we use social media a lot to reach out – with LinkedIn, of course, to the fore. I reach out to connections on LinkedIn with specific requests to try to spread the word and ask around. We use Facebook too. Just posting an advertisement on Indeed is not enough right now. Of course the other option is to use recruiters, but that is expensive. In some respects we just cannot afford to use them. LinkedIn has a great tool called Sales Navigator that we are using that I would recommend. It is a great way to search for candidates and go beyond your current network. I also recently opted to pay for LinkedIn's premium service, which gives me extra insight and tools and reach. LinkedIn, to me, is the key social media too in manufacturing.

The reality of the current situation in finding staff is that we are poaching from other businesses. It remains a struggle.

And now do we look attractive to would-be employees? That is the other side of this. One important way we can be attractive is by offering flexibility to incoming and existing staff. We have always had that ethos as a business – a culture of flexibility. Our work week as a business includes Saturday, which is a means for staff to manage their hours

and make up time on Saturday to give them more flexibility and choice in the standard working week.

At times, of course, people take advantage of the flexibility on offer. So there is a balance to strike. And it is hard in manufacturing to enable working from home. We need people in the office as a rule.

Sometimes people have expectations that don't quite fit with our company culture. You can learn that in the conversations up front and sometimes decide that a candidate isn't the best fit. Even in this environment, you still need to trust your instincts and choose not to hire if you aren't convinced it will work out. We have made mistakes in the past in hiring too hastily, and it can be damaging. One bad-fit person can damage your company culture.

Gottfredson I agree with so much of that. I think for us employee retention is the key. We try to offer a positive culture and a culture of flexibility. When the pandemic happened, our whole front office worked remotely to keep production safe. When that period passed some of those front-office staff wanted to keep working from home and we have accommodated that while ensuring standards and productivity are maintained. You can make that happen by ensuring you check in a lot with home-based staff.

You need compassion as an employer. Sometimes you have employees dealing with something difficult outside of work – a family issue, a serious illness. When that's the case you need a culture that allows your workers to be open about their situation and you need to respond and adapt and give them the time and space they need. I think taking that

“By being out there on the floor for these three days, new relationships and learnings will unfold”

approach has helped us to retain a core of staff who have stayed a long time – 20-plus years in some cases – and that has paid off for us as a business. We have not had to hire many staff in the past five years and that has been a blessing given it is such a challenge.

We leverage LinkedIn and Indeed to reach out. We also ensure we are telling a good story about the business, because we know we have a good story to share. We do things together and share our time. We have staff dinners, we volunteer together, and more. These kinds of activities keep us engaged and help us get to know each other more deeply.

We ensure we capture those informal social events and share on social channels, and candidates always are interested.

Foland It is interesting to hear these stories. In a bigger company environment like ours, one thing that has really paid dividends has been our once-a-week breakfast initiative. It has really paid off. We have different departments taking the lead each time we hold a breakfast and that is part of how the engagement works. Each time a department steps up and puts their personality into the event. It makes everyone happy and makes us all experience how we care for one another.

Outside-of-work engagements are also



important. Going out for a dinner as a department really is bonding.

I think also just ensuring the senior management team is visible and out there telling staff they are doing a great job goes a long way.

Recruitment-wise, networking in our industry is crucial. And there are industry-specific jobs boards out there that help with recruitment outside of the usual channels that others have mentioned.

Winton One thing you can do as a business is ask your people what they value and what they would like to do. I heard of a company that engaged with staff and the staff said they would value lunch being provided. So now company lunches are provided. It has had a real impact. People enjoy it and value it and the company has felt the benefit.

We have a challenge in that we are international. We have people all around the world. One of the challenges in manufacturing is that teams do work in silos at times. There is a challenge involved in bringing people together effectively. We have laid on dinners and set out tables on the manufacturing floor at times and it has really worked.

Gottfredson Being personal goes a long way, too. I take the time and trouble to write to members of staff once a year with what we call a 'love letter' thanking them for all they have done in specific terms and checking in on and acknowledging their personal situation.

Making yourself accessible as a leader in the company is also important. It is not just about reaching out but about being available.

Hao I suppose one of the themes that is emerging here is how companies need to work on their culture first and foremost,

and then the engagement and messaging is authentic because you have something real to share. That's important. It is easy to present the 'why' of your business if there is a genuine strong story.

If we turn to the question of strategy and how to grow a business in the current context, what insights can you all share?

Foland Every business has moments when it is plateauing and needs to revisit its plans, or just wants to reset things and push ahead. At Softies, I have been CEO for two years and I started by developing a new strategic plan for the company to drive fresh sales. That might sound intimidating but really it is way of bringing clarity to your actions. I started with 30-day, 60-day and 90-day goals that I then followed. And I really stuck to the tasks I had set. Our distribution was one area of challenge and we brought in a new ERP platform to enable the next phase. That was huge for us. The other focus beyond operational change was our messaging and marketing. We had an outside agency working with us but they were not quite succeeding so we went out to market for a new partner. Partly this was a process of growing up as a business, too: moving on from having that family-run small-company mentality of using friends or friends of friends to deliver certain functions rather than fully professionalising and finding the very best operators to represent us.

It is a brave new world for us working with our new marketing partner: analytics, planning, iterating, improving. It has really transformed our marketing engine. We found along the way that using SMS texting with our customers has really worked.

Website refreshes are usually a good idea, too. Don't leave it too long. Websites are the shop window today and you need to keep things fresh – with videos, with blogs, with content that is relevant and proven by the analytics to work.

We are different in that we operate in a retail space as a B2C business. One other profound way we have therefore improved our reach has been to find new marketplaces to sell through. That has been transformative. We have found marketplaces out there we didn't know about that are really paying off.

Finding and bringing in sales representatives who are subject-matter experts with industry relationships is also powerful. They have networks and relationships that drive new business from the moment they join up.

Winton In every industry and every company you need to understand where growth will come from. Even being here at FABTECH tells a story. By being out there on the floor for these three days some new relationships and learnings will unfold. Sometimes you might get a referral from a competitor that cannot fulfil something that you can. The other thing to remember is how frequently individuals move jobs now, and when they move they take the sentiment they have about your business with them. Good things can often flow from that – and, again, LinkedIn might well tell us who has moved.

A point that is related to this is the power that flows from using a customer relationship management system effectively. Sometimes salespeople aren't enthusiastic about keeping a CRM system updated. But keeping on top of CRM really pays off. **sw**