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## Retirees help stem Boeing's brain drain

### Retired employees serve as mentors, sharing their know-how with young Machinists.

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EVERETT -- In order to work on a Boeing Co. 747, 767 or 777 jet, a new Machinist has to go through Rick and Tim.

Who are the keepers of the keys to the manufacturing floor of Boeing's Everett factory?

Rick Gandee and Tim Spigler said goodbye to the jet maker a few years ago after spending at least two decades each with the company. But about six months ago, Boeing asked the two retirees to come back.

The company is approaching a critical juncture in its history: half its work force here in the Puget Sound region will be eligible for retirement within the next decade. With an influx of largely younger employees, Boeing is searching for ways to retain its knowledge base before its experienced Machinists and engineers leave.

"My job title is tribal knowledge facilitator," Spigler said with a laugh during an interview last week.

But that tribal knowledge really is the reason Boeing reached out to retirees still living in the region, said Joyce Whitehorn, a manufacturing and quality assurance manager who helped get the program going.

"These are people who have a proud legacy with the Boeing Co.," she said.

Retirees such as Gandee and Spigler were at the pinnacle of Machinists' knowledge when they left the company, making them ideal teachers of new employees, Whitehorn said.

The retiree mentoring program started as partnership between Boeing and its local Machinists union. In total, eight retirees are involved. One works with 737 Machinists at Boeing's facility in Renton. Five retirees have been assigned to working with new Machinists on Boeing's 787 aircraft in Everett. That leaves Gandee and Spigler to get new workers on the 747, 767 and 777 programs up to speed.

Warren Helm, who is in charge of training programs at Boeing, calls the mentoring that the retirees provide invaluable.

"The tribal knowledge, the knowledge they have in their heads -- they don't even know how much they

know," Helm said.

And in the world of commercial aircraft manufacturing, training is a competitive advantage, he said.

But when a company adds more than 7,000 Machinists and engineers in the last 18 months as Boeing has, training can get lost in the shuffle.

These days, before a new Machinist ever touches a Boeing jet in Everett, he or she goes through a minimum of 14 weeks of training. Four of those weeks are unpaid, pre-employment preparation. Five weeks take place in the Employment Resource Center. The final five weeks are with Gandee and Spigler in the Skills Process Center.

Depending on the type of job the Machinist will get on the floor, he or she may need to complete even more training, Helm said.

"We have standard training and we have very complex training," he said.

Gandee spent 23 years at Boeing. He likens his return to that of a professional athlete who retires from playing but stays in the sport as a coach or manager.

"I've done my time," Gandee said. "Now I get to still be part of the team."

Many Machinists retire from Boeing as early as age 55. They look for part-time jobs to keep them busy, Gandee noted. The mentoring program allows Spigler and him to stay active but continue doing something they enjoy: building Boeing jets.

And the retirees are giving new Machinists something they never had: a proper welcome to the company with rigorous hands-on training.

"When we came in, it was like 'Here's the shop floor and here's the plane. Now, go to work,'" Gandee said.

The retirees teach new Machinists the basics, such as how to drill a hole and how to decipher work instructions. But they give new employees tips and techniques that aren't on the work instructions: like which drill works best in different scenarios, and which washer, out of dozens, fits best in another situation. The mentors explain which position -- standing, sitting -- might be the most comfortable to complete a task.

Gandee describes the new generation of Machinists as "enthusiastic, eager to learn."

Many new employees rush to finish their tasks, eager to be assigned another, sometimes competing with one another, the retirees said.

"What we try to teach them is to work smart, not fast," Spigler said.

Some of the lessons include fixing one's mistakes -- a task Machinists eventually will be expected to know on the shop floor.

"It's good for the retiree, it's good for Boeing, it's good for the community," Whitehorn said.

Shari Mount, 34, started at Boeing this spring after friends steered her to work at the company. She'll begin on the 747 line today. Mount said she found her time in the skills processing center with Spigler and Gandee valuable.

"We've picked up a lot from them over here," she said.

Fellow trainee Jon Karr agreed. The 24-year-old begins work on the 767 line this week. A third-generation Machinist, Karr appreciated the intensive training he received from the retirees.

"They have a lot of knowledge," he said. "They teach us tips and tricks that you don't learn in other classes."

Both Spigler and Gandee work as contractors at Boeing and are employed through an outside company. They initially planned to come back only part time, but Boeing's hiring spree has kept them busy.

"We're still actively trying to get more (retirees) just like these two," Helm said.

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