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# Ten thousand hours of practice and a million words in print

Training consultant Joel Levitt has learned a lot from traveling and listening

By **Colin Gregory-Moores, EA Contributing Writer**

**"I'm a maintenance comedian,"** Joel Levitt, president of Springfield Resources, Havertown, Pa., says with the hint of a smile playing over the corners of his lips. "When I train people, I like to make them laugh and think about stuff." His words are sometimes slapstick, sometimes self-deprecating, often laced with a knowing soft touch of irony that makes the listener stop and reflect. Training in psychotherapy has allowed him to hone the art of observing and delving beneath the surface.

As a maintenance, reliability, and asset management consultant, trainer, and instructor, he has advised and coached 20,000 maintenance professionals from 3,000 organizations, including many global corporations, in 42 countries around the world. While he loves visiting plants, he waggishly admits, "I'm not that fond of people." His job can be taxing, requiring him always to be on his toes for longer periods.

In his line of work, Joel spends a lot of time traveling, thinking, talking, and writing, and, as he comically comments, "no time doing." That's one reason he took up working with wood. "The woodworking is fun because I enjoy doing it, and I get to see a concrete result in front of me."

## Early entrepreneurship

Joel was born in 1952 in Philadelphia to an engineer father and a dietitian mother, who later became a college professor. After being director of engineering for a truck-trailer company, his father became a consultant engineer. One of his jobs was to simulate and improve the container port, Port Elizabeth, N.J. This involved his making up slips of paper that Joel and his sister moved around the dining room to represent the actual trailer movements. "I got paid," Joel states and adds with playful incredulity, "I couldn't believe you could get paid for something like that."

His entrepreneurial spirit manifested itself at an early age. When he was 12, he would exchange \$10 for a bag of pennies at the bank. Then he'd carefully sort through these for valuable coins, which he'd sell to his friends at a profit. The penny in circulation at



*Joel Levitt working in Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, in -18°F temperatures.*  
— Joel Levitt photo

that time was the Lincoln "wheat penny" (1909-1958), and the most valuable penny of them all was the 1909-S VDB (San Francisco Mint Victor David Brenner). With feigned disappointment, he says that he never found one.

At 17, knowing that he was going to study at Temple University (1970-1976), he purchased a four-unit building with his friend Alan. He took out a loan, which his father co-signed, and he and Alan added their bar mitzvah money. They rehabbed the basement for themselves. This was followed by further purchases, which were fully no-money-down deals. Eventually, they sold everything, when they went their separate ways.

Meanwhile, after realizing sociology wasn't to his liking, Joel became a computer major. Since computers were the newest thing back then, no one knew what they really were. He was drawn to the idea of developing algorithms to solve problems. Growing up in a household where - thanks to his parents' professions - problem-solving was, as he says, in the air, he showed an aptitude for it.

Studying part-time at university, Joel started working in the steel shop and wire-harness business his father purchased in 1973, meteorically

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rising to become executive vice president. "My father didn't care about titles, but I did," he chortles. SL Industries (the initials of both Joel's father and mother) acquired a small local gym equipment and basketball backstop business, of which Joel became the boss, building it into a half-million-dollar operation. He managed sales, negotiations, and even drafted construction drawings. However, after the 1979 oil crisis caused bankruptcies among their main clients in the trailer, RV, and specialized truck industries, Joel and his father were forced to liquidate their businesses.

### The business founder

In 1980, Joel founded Springfield Resources. He started with a license from a U.K. company of the same name to produce plastic-coated electronically read keys for managing refueling sites. Since there were few people trained to work with Article 500 wiring, Joel became an electrician. Working alone made progress slow, but his fuel management system caught the eye of Jay Butler. Jay was a maintenance guru who was ahead of his time and had already designed a successful CMMS (computerized maintenance management system) for truck fleets. Through him, Joel was introduced to the world of maintenance consulting, and his father, who was still active as a consultant, passed on work to him too.

Thanks to Jay, Joel also began teaching maintenance management courses at universities across

the U.S. and Canada for a continuing education company. In addition, from 1989 to 2018, he taught three to four courses each year for the University of Alabama. Besides gaining experience in the field, Joel says, he learned a lot by teaching and listening to his students, who came from various industries. He unpretentiously credits his world-class expertise to the 10,000-hour rule, a principle propounded by Canadian author Malcolm Gladwell according to which one can attain world-class expertise in a skill by practicing it correctly for 10,000 hours.

### The self-made consultant

In 2000, Joel took a leadership course in which, as part of an exercise, he declared himself to be an international consultant. Once he started to talk and act like an international consultant, he soon received an offer to do two days of maintenance training in Singapore.

Springfield Resources is a one-person, globally active consulting and training company that is "an expression of whatever [Joel is] doing at any time," Joel says. Some years, he did mining work all year. One year, he worked mostly for a worldwide technology leader. He says, "Springfield Resources' distinguishing feature is that the companies get me." He laughs. As an internationally recognized coach, trainer, and consultant, Joel has worked for major corporations throughout the world in maintenance planning and scheduling, as well as doing assessments of maintenance organization, roadmaps for improvements, CMMS's, lean maintenance, total productive maintenance, preventive maintenance, and proactive reliability maintenance.

Joel is a highly sought-after expert in the U.S. and beyond. In the late 2000s, he visited a South African gold mine to help install a CMMS. As they rapidly descended 5,000 feet into the belly of the Earth, his guide ribbed him about how people had almost broken their necks on the car's ceiling because of a jarring stop brought about by a power failure and the brakes automatically engaging. Once underground, clutching a bar and wedging a disc between his legs, he unceremoniously descended a further 4,000 feet on a Poma lift.

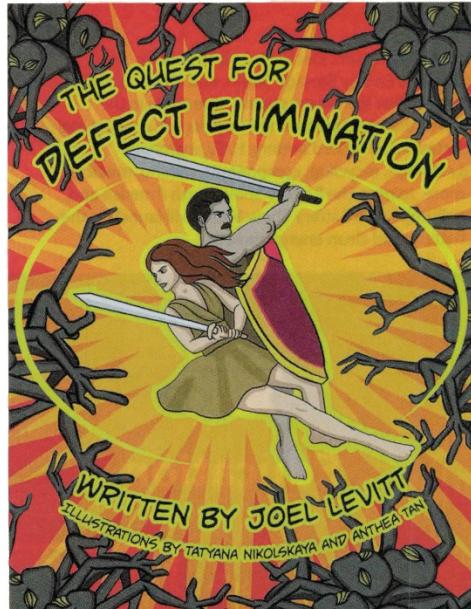
### Looking to pass it on

Currently, Joel is focused on passing on his knowledge of maintenance management to the next generation. "I want to give them the insights that they might not otherwise get." To this end, since Covid he has published six vividly narrated comic books about the fundamentals of maintenance management. These are in addition to the numerous other books he has published since 1989, swearing, when he turned 70, never to write another "seriously boring" book again. He estimates that he has 1 million words in print.

Joel is particularly concerned with the fact that, due to the ubiquitous drive to lower costs, apprentices and young professionals in many industries are not mentored as they once were. Consequently, knowledge is in danger of being lost. Referring to the current crisis of getting skilled people who can go right to work, he adds, "Even though young people have good technical skills, they don't have the 10,000 practice hours in to have acquired the necessary hands-on skills."

Having done far, far more than the 10,000 practice hours to acquire expertise in many areas and with a million words in print under his belt, Joel, as he has gotten older, has found comfort with his own abilities. "I don't worry so much now about what I'm going to say. I've been around the block."

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Cover of Joel Levitt's book *The Quest for Defect Elimination*, published by Springfield Resources in 2020. — Joel Levitt photo