



Metalworking

Lessons from Rosie the Riveter: How Women Can Solve Manufacturing's Workforce Woes

Kip Hanson | Jul 09, 2024

It has been a little more than 80 years since Norman Rockwell's now-famous depiction of "Rosie the Riveter" was splashed across the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

The painting, published on May 29, 1943, paid tribute to the women who had picked up tools in factories across the U.S., building ships, planes and munitions to defend the country and its allies during World War II and providing critical support at a pivotal point in global history.

Today, women are once again playing a transformative role in U.S. manufacturing, which finds itself threatened by a widening shortage of skilled labor.

While women now comprise roughly 30 percent of the industry's employees, according to the *U.S. Department of Commerce*, that figure still lags behind their 47 percent share of the country's overall workforce. The gap points to a potential market for manufacturers who must fill an additional 2.4 million workers by 2028 or risk losing about half a trillion dollars of annual gross domestic product, or GDP.

No longer considered the dark, dirty and dangerous trade that Americans viewed it as when Rosie the Riveter and her coverall-wearing colleagues joined its ranks in the 1940s, manufacturing today boasts wages that are 21 percent higher than the median.

'A Huge Struggle' to Find Workers

A *recent survey* by online industrial marketplace Xometry found that 80 percent of women are "pleased with the strides they've made in manufacturing" over the past five years and would recommend the field to others, even though most had not intended to pursue such a career path.

"As everyone is painfully aware, there's been a huge struggle with finding skilled workers over the last decade," says Allison Grealis, who is the president and founder of the Women in Manufacturing Association (WiM) and was cited in the Xometry survey.

Her organization, she explained in an interview with *Better MRO*, tries to help businesses “not only find and identify talent but retain female workers long term through our formal professional development programs and other tools that we offer to them and their employees.”

Q: Tell us more about your organization and why you started it.

A: I began working with manufacturing companies around 23 years ago after taking a position with the PMA, or Precision Metalforming Association. I had the opportunity to work with women across the industry and soon found that they had an interest in getting connected, benchmarking and sharing resources with one another, but they didn't necessarily have a vehicle to do so. We started having meetings, and I eventually decided to test the waters and scheduled a large conference in Cleveland, Ohio, which gained immediate interest and enjoyed a great positive response afterward. That was 14 years ago, and today, Women in Manufacturing has nearly 30,000 members in the United States and more than 65 countries, all focused on supporting, promoting and inspiring women in industry.

Q: What services does WiM offer to achieve its goals? Is the primary focus to meet and share experiences?

A: Not at all. We deliver a variety of resources to both individual women as well as to manufacturing companies. Those resources include access to training and education for our members, not to mention endless opportunities for people to make new connections, whether it be virtual or live at our programs. We also power 33 chapters nationwide that people can tap into for local networking, training, education and exposure to manufacturing excellence. And for manufacturing companies, we deliver support for their recruiting and employment efforts, including career fairs and a job board called WiMWorks.

Q: What types of jobs are you helping to fill, and is the compensation competitive?

A: We help companies fill all sorts of positions, from forklift operators to plant managers and everything in between. There are also many apprenticeship or student internship opportunities. As for compensation, the glass ceiling that once existed is largely gone. Women can have a rewarding, very profitable job in manufacturing, and there's no shortage of opportunities for those looking to find placement there.

Q: To be blunt, what about the perception that women need to stay home when the kids are sick? Is that still a concern, and if so, what should be done about it?

A: We're hugely focused on that very issue and are actively trying to reframe the conversation around child care, making it a parents' issue rather than a moms' issue. Looking at it from a larger perspective, the discussion applies to caregiving in general. Many of us help take care of family members and significant others with certain needs, and we know that it impacts everyone involved, not just women. Our goal is to make this a larger issue and discuss ways to solve it.

Q: Similarly, do you still hear concerns from women that the manufacturing trades are dirty and dangerous and that the best careers are those that require a college education?

A: I think there's been a huge movement over the last couple of decades to better inform people about what modern manufacturing looks like. This includes storytelling at the company level and through individuals that manufacturing is nothing like it was years ago and that it offers great opportunities for advancement. Production facilities all over the globe are embracing technology and innovation and that has helped to attract increased numbers of people, men and women alike. We're very inclusive and have many male members as well.

Q: Can you tell us more about that?

A: We are open to all supporters, various trade organizations among them. For instance, we have a reciprocal membership agreement with the *Association for Manufacturing Excellence* and have hosted partnered activities with groups like the *Society of Women Engineers*. We also have a joint membership

with the Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME), so people can join SME and WiM at the same time at a discounted rate for both. We aim to be a key resource for both individuals and manufacturing companies and provide many benefits to each. I'm very proud of what we've accomplished and look forward to another 14 years and beyond.

What is your business doing to attract more women workers? Tell us in the comments below.

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