Skills Gap

4 Proven Methods for Filling Local Manufacturing Jobs

Julie Sullivan | Oct 10, 2017

What You Need to Know:

Despite optimism from manufacturers, there remains a sizable skill gap among metalworking and manufacturing employees in the United States.
The core issue: Not enough youngsters are signing up for metalworking careers—and for a number of reasons, from stigma to a lack of technical and soft skills.
However, there are things employers can do to combat the skills gap, including partnering with local schools and workforce boards and helping to position jobs in metalworking as a viable career.

The skills gap exists in metalworking and manufacturing for a number of challenging reasons. But despite those obstacles, there are a series of real-world actions employers can take to add to their rosters.

Despite a recent (and spiked) upturn in ***optimism*** in the manufacturing industry, there's a sizable blemish on that bliss: the skills gap.

As a ***Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute report*** highlights, almost 3.5 million manufacturing jobs will likely need to be filled by 2025, but nearly 2 million of those jobs are expected to go unfulfilled due to a skills deficit.

The report found that while baby boomer retirement and economic expansion certainly play a role, one of the key reasons for the gap is a lack of skilled, trained workers: 84 percent of executives surveyed agree—there is a huge talent gap that exists today in the manufacturing and metalworking industries.

So why the divide? There are a number of key reasons, including a lack of enough hands-on skills and a "college-or-bust" cultural mentality.

"Education systems are often not responsive to employers' needs," says Katherine McClelland, director of education and workforce initiatives at The Manufacturing Institute. "Manufacturers struggle with outdated perceptions of manufacturing careers, and we've been in a culture where we are promoting four-year college degrees as the only option for a successful career despite overwhelming opportunities in manufacturing."

“Manufacturing is not always viewed by our youth and parents as a viable career, and this prohibits any potential interest for manufacturing among your youth,” explains Matthew R. Rocco, president of the *South Florida Manufacturers Association*. “Our youth are constantly being told that they either have to become a lawyer, doctor or accountant to be successful, and manufacturing is not being included in that mix.”

Another key factor in the manufacturing skills gap is the downward trend in teen employment, says McClelland. The *numbers* show teens working much less than they used to at an earlier age: In 1979, teen workforce participation was 58 percent; in 2011, after the Great Recession, it was 34 percent (and remains in a narrow range today), according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“With teen employment continuing to drop, employers cannot expect new hires to come ready to work and equipped with the employability skills they need to be successful without having access to work-based learning opportunities earlier in their education and career paths,” says McClelland.

But any stigma associated with metalworking positions can’t take the full blame for the gap. As Rocco says, many of the workers coming into positions either don’t have adequate training on new equipment and technologies, or they’re lacking in “soft” skills like showing up on time, problem-solving, critical thinking and communication.

“Employers are also realizing that when their employees have solid technical skills, those employees sometimes are put in a leadership or supervisory position,” he says. “What employers come to soon realize is that those employees lack the proper soft skills to be successful in those roles. Employers then need to find training to fill in those gaps.”

Whether it’s a lack of technical or soft skills, there are steps that can be taken to help ensure manufacturers are drawing from and attracting a pool of skilled labor at the local level. Here are four methods the experts say to put into action to find, develop and harness much-needed local talent.

1. Become a Manufacturing Career and Curricular Advisor at Local Schools

As far as obtaining new talent, plucking skilled workers straight out of school would seem like a no-brainer (72 percent of manufacturing executives believe that the best way to find skilled labor is through schools, per Deloitte). However, the phrase “if you build it, they will come” doesn’t necessarily translate in this case. Employers seeking skilled metalworking labor will need to do their due diligence when it comes to actively sourcing skilled talent from schools.

“Employers should get more involved with their local community college, state college and/or university,” explains Rocco. “Those in charge of hiring should take an active role in becoming an advisory board member in related programs so they can audit current curricula and recommend changes so the student learning outcomes are more relevant to current industry-demanded needs.”

Furthermore, Rocco says that participation in the education system shouldn’t stop there. He suggests “adopting” a school or class to mentor students at the middle or high school level.

“This would allow students to see the benefits and advantages of choosing a career in manufacturing,” he advises. “Employers could work with teachers to give them real-world projects in manufacturing for students to complete and then those students can see the various aspects on how ‘fun’ a career in manufacturing can be.”

For example, a Nevada-based manufacturing company, Click Bond, *worked closely* with Western Nevada College to develop courses that were relevant to Click Bond’s on-the-job work skills and business. They also crafted a program for interns enrolling at the local college.

One way to get started: Partner with a skills group in manufacturing like *SkillsUSA*. The certified

program serves high school, college and middle school students searching for work in technical trades.

"Partnering with education providers to ensure that the courses they are offering reflect the skills and competencies of local employers is an important first step," echoes McClelland. "To really address the skills gap, employers and educators must partner to attract students to these academic pathways and ensure that academic programs are reflective of employers' needs."

2. Leverage Local Workforce Development Boards

In addition to sourcing talent from schools, Rocco recommends tapping into pools of graduated and even seasoned metalworkers looking for work via economic development workforce boards.

"Employers should also align with the local economic development workforce boards so they can develop relationships to hire interns to expose to manufacturing and also use this relationship as a source of recruiting of candidates for employment," he advises.

The ***National Association of Workforce Boards*** (or NAWB) is a solid place to start. The organization represents a wide range of businesses (over 12,000) in roughly 550 counties and cities. These types of boards help to ensure all types of trades are accounted for in terms of staffing. Alternatively, you can Google your county or city name and "workforce board" to find your own local chapter. Here are two examples: ***New York City's*** workforce board and Phoenix's board in ***Maricopa County***.

3. Invest in Skills Development Programs and Stackable Credential Systems

When it comes to bringing in new staff, there are inevitable knowledge-transfer concerns. Workers in metalworking and manufacturing tend to be either just out of school (and lacking real-world knowledge about their trade) or seasoned veterans. This experience gap can often steer potential hires away from an industry where precision and technical savvy are paramount, highlights the ***Chicago Tribune***.

In response to this issue, Rocco suggests something called a "stackable credential system."

"A stackable credential system is such a unique process and a huge benefit to become highly skilled at a faster pace," he explains. "This can lead to advancement within the company and ultimately a higher wage. When someone completes a technical certificate and moves on to another technical certificate, previous coursework will be articulated into the new technical certificate and students will be given credit for prior coursework. The benefit is that students can advance more quickly through each technical certificate and become highly skilled at a faster pace since they don't have to take a course common to multiple technical certificates."

In other words, newbies are trained at a rapid pace––and rewarded for it. One particular system with stackable credentials to consider: The M-List from the ***Manufacturing Institute***. The program works with various certification organizations to develop skills certifications for students after they've graduated from college or technical school, in addition to partnering with schools to ensure manufacturing is a prominent study.

"Often, it's difficult to know the difference in quality between one academic program at a school and another, or what skills students will have coming out of the programs," says McClelland. "The SCS [National Association of Manufacturers'-Endorsed Skills Certification System] was put into place to help provide clarity and consistency … These credentials are developed by people currently working in the industry—those with the best knowledge of what skills and competencies are in demand."

A stackable system allows for a very clear path for knowledge gain—and a potential path for wage growth. The M-List recognizes academic programs that have embedded the NAM-Endorsed SCS into

their for-credit classes. This is important, McClelland explains, because students are able to continuously build toward their next education goal, whether it's an associate, bachelor's or master's degree.

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> Matthew R. Rocco
> President of the South Florida Manufacturers Association

4. Promote Manufacturing Jobs as Viable Career Opportunities

Not all youngsters necessarily see metalworking as a viable career with growth potential, suggests Rocco. But if manufacturers are to employ a skilled, enthusiastic workforce, promoting these positions as exciting jobs with real-world application will be critical.

"There needs to be more channels introducing manufacturing as a viable and beneficial career for recent graduates and those in school," Rocco says. "And there needs to be a better effort finding a platform to promote careers within manufacturing."

There are localized programs out there that are actively promoting manufacturing careers and highlighting the trajectory that can be taken. The ***Golden Corridor Advanced Manufacturing Partnership***, for example, works with Palatine and Arlington Heights school districts in Illinois to create a sustainable talent pipeline in its local area.

In addition to hosting internships, the organization sponsors robotics contests and holds open houses showcasing all the new and innovative prototype features within facilities, according to the ***Chicago Tribune***. The gist? Position your business as cutting edge and worth the investment.

"We know that the future of manufacturing will require continuous learning in order to make sure that all employees have the skills they need as technology rapidly changes," adds McClelland. "Making sure that students are earning credit for their learning is an important step in ensuring students' and employers' success."

How does your shop source skilled labor in the community? Let us know in the comment section below.