

# The Challenges Of Training Skilled Workers

**T**he U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says that by 2010 the number of unfilled skilled worker jobs will reach 5.3 million, increasing to 14 million by 2015. One of the biggest issues in trying to maintain a viable manufacturing base in America is not outsourcing or foreign competitors – It is training the manufacturing workers for the 21st century. If we can't find a way to train and educate the skilled workers that we need in manufacturing, all other efforts to save American manufacturing will become academic.

Obviously, 14 million jobs is a huge opportunity, particularly when it is getting harder and harder for people to find "family wage" jobs in the service industries. Unfortunately, it is a very complex problem and we must clearly understand the challenges before asking for the support to launch a massive training program. There are four different dimensions to this problem.

## Manufacturing's Image

The single biggest problem is that American manufacturing has a bad image. A study sponsored by National Association of Manufactures (NAM), and Deloitte & Touche showed that manufacturing's image was "found to be heavily loaded with negative connotations and universally tied to the stereotype of the assembly line." It was also viewed by most people to be a dying industry that was quickly moving offshore.

Many students and citizens still see manufacturing as a world of dirty, dark, sweatshops offering long hours and low pay. Students use adjectives like "boring," "repetitious," and "dangerous" to describe their preconceived notion of manufacturing. The perception by high school and college students is that there seems to be no sense of loyalty from the manufacturing companies and very little security.

## Government's Role?

The government's role in manufacturing training can be illustrated by a personal story. Bill Ruggles, a worker in Oregon, was laid off when the plastics injection plant he worked for moved to Mexico. In this case, Ruggles was able to get assistance from the Trade and Adjustment Assistance program, which helps manufacturers who are losing work to for-

eign competitors. Originally Ruggles was interested in getting a degree in industrial management, but his employment-training counselor turned him down because the degree was going to be too much like his previous job— in manufacturing.

The government allowed him to enroll in a community college natural resources program. This landed him a 6-month job surveying spotted owls for \$10.90 hour. He couldn't make a living doing the job and eventually went through all of his savings and filed for bankruptcy in February of 2004.

The point is, the government cannot be expected to know how to re-train workers. They seldom have the people who can select the right jobs for training, develop the curriculum, or conduct the training.

## Educational Problems

Manufacturers rate the community colleges as their preferred training providers. The community college problem is that many of the vocational courses are not sufficiently financed. It is ironic that at the same time manufacturers are crying about the need for new skilled jobs and bitterly denouncing the educational institutions, vocational education institutions are being closed down. The result has been the elimination of industrial arts training in grade schools and high schools and a decrease in funding for vocational colleges.

This reinforces the stigma that getting skilled training or enrolling in a vocational program is a dead end ticket to a dirty job with no upward mobility.

The only

practical conclusion is that our education system, from the first grade to graduate school, has not kept in tune with the skills needed for kids to get a job in the new economy. The big question is, will manufacturing provide the support to realign the education and training programs to better meet the needs of both individuals and manufacturers— or will they just sit back and point the finger?

## Large Manufacturers

The large manufacturing companies at the top of the supply chain that are in a position to control suppliers and sometimes whole industries are the companies most likely to close U.S. plants, send work to foreign suppliers, lay off their employees, and force their U.S. suppliers to downsize. They are a big part of the image problem and have not made a strong case that investing in the time and training to be a skilled worker in manufacturing is a good economic decision. A second problem also associated with the large manufacturers is their unwillingness to invest in training. Many studies have shown that manufacturers invest a mere 2 percent of their payrolls into training.

Manufacturing must take the lead in showing that manufacturing workers are valuable, and that American manufacturing can be a good career investment. The opportunity is upon us, and we need to acknowledge that training in the 21st century is about advanced technical skills that need to be integrated into educational curriculums.

Next month's installment will be on how best to take advantage of it.

*In his 35 years in manufacturing— including corporate positions from salesman to VP, and extensive consulting with the NIST Manufacturing Extension Partnership— Mike Collins has helped companies make the transition from being "Defender" organizations focused internally, on process change and cost-cutting, to "Prospector" companies focused externally, on finding new markets and profitable growth. His new book, Saving American Manufacturing, is a comprehensive step-by-step strategy that demonstrates how to ultimately become an organization that will continuously find new opportunities in today's fast-changing global economy.*

