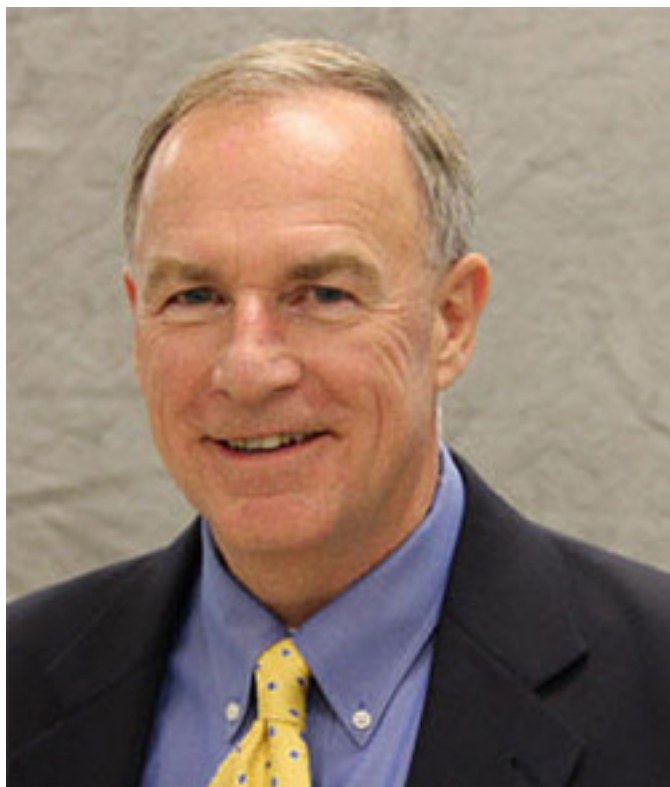


5 Quick Questions: Mike Weller, President, Miller Electric

Jeff Reinke, Editorial Director

Interview with Mike Weller, President, Miller Electric



Miller Electric, a leading manufacturer of welders and welding supplies, recently announced that its president, Mike Weller, has been recognized by the Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association for his service to the Wisconsin Technical College System. Mr. Weller received the Technical Education Champion Award for his work with Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC) in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Given the constant pressure that manufacturers face in attracting and replacing skilled workers, we asked Weller for some perspective on the future of the skilled trades and what the manufacturing sector can do to increase interest in the field from the next generation of workers.

Q: What led you to get involved so heavily with the vocational schools in Wisconsin?

A: I've been involved with the technical colleges for 30 years now. My relationship with them, particularly the Fox Valley Technical College, started when I began teaching there part time. Some years later, as our products at Miller Electric Mfg. Co. were evolving, we found we needed electrical/mechanical training for our

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

employees. FVTC offered a solution: they built a classroom and hired a full time instructor to train our employees in the skills they needed to help the company remain competitive.

The relationship has been building since and has been a win-win over the years. We've provided them with equipment in exchange for the training and the partnership has evolved from there. Our company now works in a similar capacity with Northwest Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay and supports other vocational schools throughout the state.

Q: What have been some of your most rewarding experiences?

A: There have been so many rewarding experiences; it's difficult to narrow them down. Helping FVTC completely refurbish its welding and manufacturing center in Oshkosh was great!

Being able to set up the training programs for our employees was also rewarding. It really allowed us to remain competitive and give our employees the right skills for their jobs. That was such a change in paradigms about how training was delivered. It was the first time FVTC had done something like that and it was great to be a part of a new program. I saw what it did for our employees, in terms of their careers and for our company to be competitive.

I've also had the pleasure of giving speeches and symposiums on behalf of the vocational schools to high school guidance counselors. I've been able to share with them the ways that they can link business and education together so they can provide students with better career guidance.

Q: Finding qualified workers in manufacturing continues to be a challenge. What do you feel are some ways the manufacturing community can help remedy this situation?

A: Education. In middle school and high school, giving kids access to classes and having guidance counselors share the career opportunities in this field is key. Giving high schools students the opportunity to take hands-on classes or participate in internships is also important so they can build experiences to take into the workforce.

These opportunities help students understand that the work environment in manufacturing is good. The more we can educate students about the industry the better. Plus, if we can get educators and business people linked about the skill sets, ethics and work habits required to go into the manufacturing sector, it can open up a lot of doors for a lot of young people.

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Q: Given only one of the following options, which do you feel is the better way to go: invest in training current employees or spend more to find and attract the right, qualified person for a position?

A: I would invest training in current employees. These are the people who have helped build our company. At Miller, our average seniority is 19 years with less than two percent turnover. We believe in giving people the chance and the skills to build their careers and want to continue to see them grow. Our employees aren't shy about learning skills and are always up for that challenge — they learn everything from how to read our company financials to streamlining work processes and developing better decision-making and communication skills.

Q: If you could give U.S. manufacturing one thing, what would it be?

A: It would be a combination of things: One, encourage manufacturers to empower their employees to take the company to the next level and two, the implementation of the 80/20 principle. This is a dynamic combination to significantly improve their profitability, as well as increase their competitive position — strengthening the heart of companies' performance in the manufacturing sector.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/25/2015 - 1:17pm):

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