Developing the Workforce of Tomorrow, Part 2

This is part two of a two-part piece. Part one can be found here *[1].*

Q: The whitepaper discussed many of the differences between the baby boomer generation and Gen Y. Which of these differences do you feel will be the most challenging to address?

Ferrante: For many years, manufacturing has been characterized as a less than desirable career choice, so the Gen Ys look at manufacturing as a last resort – or not an option at all. Parents are under the impression that jobs are not stable, pay is low and the environment is dirty. But the reality is that today's manufacturing jobs require a highly skilled workforce to operate and maintain high tech, highly automated equipment. Skilled workers enjoy good pay and job security – and the environment in many plants, thanks to initiatives such as lean and 5S, is clean and organized. Another issue is our education system. High schools are evaluated on how many students move on to four year colleges or universities – and not on the number of skilled workers they produce. Until there is more focus on the right pathway for each individual student, it will continue to be an uphill battle to showcase the value of these gold collar jobs.

PMMI is working hard with its members to reach out to high schools to excite and educate kids about packaging and processing career choices. We are planning to bring several groups of high school students to PACK EXPO so they can showcase their robotics projects, and we can expose them to the world's largest packaging

and processing classroom.

Q: Any time change is involved, which is clearly the case when comparing the manufacturing worker of today with one of tomorrow, cost is a factor. What advice could you offer to plant managers struggling to get the funds they need to enact the changes necessary to field a competitive workforce?

Riedl: Think hard about where the opportunity is in your operations and how, with a focused start, you can rapidly self-fund subsequent investments. When they re-focus on the shop floor and apply team-based problem solving skills (i.e. Lean, Six-Sigma) in a structured and deliberate manner, our clients are consistently able to define a sequence of focused initiatives that generate substantial and rapid benefits in productivity, product yields, quality or working capital reduction. Do your homework, figure out the three or four things that can quickly drive change and get those done first. In parallel, define the core capabilities required to drive longer-term profitable growth.

Ferrante: Your workforce is your most important asset – and your biggest competitive advantage. Maintaining a qualified, skilled, updated workforce is an investment – but one that will pay dividends. Fortunately there are resources available to help you keep your workforce current. PMMI has several ongoing conferences and programs such as The Conference at PACK EXPO and the PMMI Safety and Technology Conference to provide the latest information on many topics at a reasonable cost. Another option is to contact your local community colleges; they can often help you access grant money to get the training you need – and they will often times write the grant for you. Your local workforce investment board is another excellent resource for funding needed training and skills development. Keeping your workforce trained is critical to staying competitive.

Q: Have re-shoring initiatives been significant enough to positively impact manufacturing employment figures?

Riedl: We have seen modest manufacturing employment growth over the last 12 months, but these are off of recessionary lows. Booz & Company believes we will see considerable increases in U.S. manufacturing output as labor, transportation and energy economics drive a return of manufacturing to North America, but continued productivity advances will likely minimize net gains. Manufacturing will continue to become a knowledge –based endeavor, primarily benefiting workers with post-high school education.

Ferrante: A skilled North American workforce will ensure that good manufacturing jobs remain in North America. Keeping jobs here, on North American soil, has proven to be both smart and economical. We need to continue to work with industry to ensure that the North American workforce remains strong and ready to move manufacturing forward.

Q: Do you have any other thoughts on manufacturing employment or U.S. manufacturing in general?

Riedl: While the U.S. manufacturing sector faces significant domestic and global challenges, it also has many core strengths:

- The core foundation is still intact to drive a renaissance – yes, infrastructure, basic education, and worker skills all require investment, but the building blocks are robust
- The U.S. is one of the most innovative countries in the world. The manufacturing sector both drives and benefits from this – it is a virtuous

circle. In fact, approximately 2/3 of all private-sector R&D is conducted by manufacturing companies. Therefore, it is critical that we leverage the proximity of U.S. manufacturing to take new, innovative products to market faster than any other country is capable of doing
- While partnering with federal, state, and local governments can be challenging and time-intensive, there are numerous examples of partnerships that have led manufacturers to long-term profitability. Continuing to build these connections through robust policy development and grassroots initiatives is key.
- Demographically, the U.S. is well-positioned. Unlike many other western societies, the U.S. population continues to grow – three times the rate of Europe over the next 40 years. This not only generates strong demand from a relatively wealthy marketplace, but it also provides a pipeline of new talent – it's up to manufacturers to shape it.

Ferrante: Manufacturing in North America is strong – and in order to stay competitive we need to continue to invest in training and developing our workforce. Programs like the PMMI Mechatronics Certificates are critical to supporting the new technology, innovation and growth in manufacturing. Exposing kids, parents, teachers and guidance counselors to today's innovative, high tech packaging and processing environment will go a long way to dispelling the myths about manufacturing and showcasing the exciting career opportunities available.

The full study, a 17-page PDF, is available for free and can be downloaded immediately (sign-in required) from the AIOE website [2].

Bios

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