Changing the Mindset of Manufacturing

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By AMANDA EARING, News Editor, Manufacturing.net

When I was in college, I worked at the local printing plant every summer. It was hot, dirty, monotonous and arduous work feeding paper into binding machines, but I enjoyed it. The labor kept me in shape, but what I really enjoyed was seeing the fruits of my labor — I was part of making something people used every day. But each summer I heard the same spiel from “lifers” at the plant: stay in school, get your education and *don’t come back*.

The premise for the lecture was always that there are better jobs available than those in manufacturing.

What happened to the era when manufacturing was considered a worthy career choice? Why is a career in manufacturing viewed as a less valuable option? I know I’m not the first to raise such questions, but it seems we’re still looking for adequate answers.

A skilled workforce is pertinent to creating a competitive manufacturing base in a global economy. While an engineer might have great ideas for improving your operations, it still takes skilled laborers to make that vision a reality.

There have been contradicting reports on whether we’ll see a shortage of skilled laborers in the future, but one thing is certain — many students regard manufacturing in a negative light.

That needs to change.

Whether it’s a higher education degree or an apprentice program, it’s time that more students looked at manufacturing as a promising career choice. This starts with educating students about how a manufacturing career is worth pursuing. We need young, talented minds and fresh ideas. We need more innovation, ingenuity and workers with a sense of passion for what they do.

But this means doing more than just promoting manufacturing careers to high school students; we need to change the mindset of workers like those I spent time

with each summer. This might be the the group most capable of painting either a positive or negative picture about manufacturing, and the career path it represents.

Like so many things in our marketplace, change needs to start on the plant floor. We need to change how manufacturing employees perceive their jobs. We need to instill a sense of pride in their work. If your workers don't see what they are doing as positive, perhaps it's time to look at how you interact with employees.

Each summer, I saw why my colleagues griped day in and day out. They griped because they saw no value in what they were doing and no way to move up. Management refused to listen to suggestions or cost-saving ideas. Employees were treated with little respect and little reward was given when production goals were met.

Promoting career choices and unique aspects of working in manufacturing won't be enough if workers don't see value or take pride in what they do. So take a look around. Start finding ways to change your workforce into a positive representation of manufacturing in the U.S. Only then can we as an industry recruit — and retain — the quality workforce necessary to build a stronger manufacturing base and help our country's economy heal and expand.

What are your thoughts? Sound off by e-mailing me at amanda.earing@advantagemedia.com [1].

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