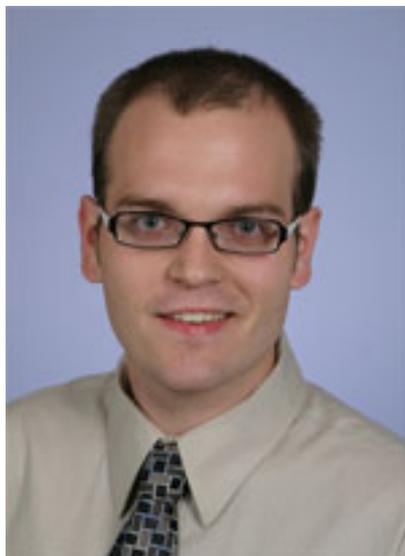


Get Ready to Get Training

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It's true — some U.S. [manufacturers are having trouble finding highly-skilled workers](#) [1] to fill available positions, according to a recent article from the *New York Times*. It sounds unbelievable. According to the [most recent statistics](#) [2], there are 14.6 million Americans looking for work. Surely a handful of these people would be suitable for a manufacturing job? Turns out many of the unemployed are unqualified for the skilled jobs these companies need filled.

But this is exactly what we wanted, isn't it? American manufacturing has moved, on many levels, beyond the low-skill manual labor of centuries past, and companies are increasing their usage of highly-technical practices like automation and CNC machining. For years, pundits said this was the only way we could survive, because we've been robbed of the low-skill work by emerging industrial markets like China and India. But in upping our technological base, turning to automation, and implementing technology that requires a firm grasp on mathematics and engineering principles, we have alienated an eager work force.

For many of the unemployed, these jobs will never be a possibility. Perhaps some preparatory school can teach them enough to land in one of these high-skill positions, but that isn't a reality for everyone. For many, schools are too far away, or they simply can't afford to pay for tuition (since they're out of work to begin with). Even so, something must be done: The manufacturer profiled in the NY Times article found that less than 2 percent of its applicants were qualified for the available positions. Perhaps this staggeringly low number suggests manufacturers should get ready to take on the training and education burden themselves. I know the suggestion of hiring a person and then paying dearly for their education borders on blasphemy in the business community. Manufacturers with available high-skill positions don't have an obligation to teach applicants the fundamentals behind their

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processes, but it could be in their best interest.

And many cases, the 40-something who has been working in manufacturing job for the last 20 years (yet does not immediately qualify for a high-skill position) might actually make for a better candidate than a 23-year-old who just walked off the stage with their engineering diploma in hand. Think about the malleability of someone who has worked on the shop floor for years; they understand tools, safety, how to work hard, and so on. These things aren't resume-friendly, but they're important. Perhaps the burden of educating these workers to your satisfaction in mathematics is actually less than the burden of teaching an Ivy League grad what an air compressor is. At the same time, don't neglect your current employees; they are probably smarter than you think, and with a little training, could take on a hard-to-fill position with ease. What worker wouldn't take a promotion, even if it means a few night classes?

But smart companies won't forget about the youngsters, either. In a decisive time for American manufacturing, a black-and-white approach to any issue is a death sentence — one has to be more nuanced than that. Manufacturers need to take a vested interest in scouting and recruiting young workers. The investment is small, and the rewards could be essential to staying afloat in a tumultuous economy. If you have a community college or high school in your area (particularly if they still have a shop program), reach out and see if you can't let some of the students tour your facility. Give them an introduction into the manufacturing of the 21st century. Show them that many jobs require a great deal of thought and skill, and that programming a CNC machine is fundamentally similar to what many of them do on their computers every day.

Many of these young students will go on to receive some sort of higher education, and in a few years might be perfectly qualified to do the complex work you need. Their primary issue, when compared to someone who is experienced in manufacturing, is the typical lack of tool knowledge, which — like the 40-something who might need remedial schooling in math — will come at the expense of the employer.

Whether you think your time is best spent training those workers available now, or targeting a new batch for the future, you should still come back to the same critical question: When your workforce retires, or as your operations continue to evolve, what kind of jobs will be created? Are they based upon complex principles in mathematics? Do they require a high school diploma, or a Master's in mechanical engineering? If the jobs are in the former category, you likely will not have trouble finding competent employees, both young and old, not with the millions of currently unemployed. But if those jobs are more complex, perhaps it's time to think about who — and how — you want to spend your time training.

Where do your plans for training future employees fall? Are you just shocked that some companies are having trouble filling open positions? Share your thoughts at joel.hans@advantagemedia.com [3].

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