Food Jobs on Jobs

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By MIKE RAINONE, Co-Founder, PCDworks [1]

I came across a few things in life that bear comment this month. One leads into the same rant about Silicon Valley. The other is an optimistic story about my recent experience at the National Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers show in Orlando.

I noticed last week on the *Product Design & Development* feed [2], President Obama was assembling the biggest names in Silicon Valley to confer on jobs, education, and innovation. The notion that the good folks in Silicon Valley know anything about U.S. manufacturing jobs and education seems a trifle foolish.

As I said last month, I think Silicon Valley is the drain through which our hard earned money flows as we become more enchanted with “IT” gadgets. While I do admire the innovative spirit that seems to flourish in that area and in California in general, I am not sure that it’s the best place to ask for insights about how to enhance jobs or education. Steve Jobs certainly knows innovation, but what does he, Zuckerberg, or any of them know about creating real manufacturing jobs or the educational requirements thereof?

Obama should have convened his “wonder kinder” assembly in Chicago and asked the head of Caterpillar, Baldor, Emerson, Kohler, and a dozen other Midwest heavy-iron companies for advice, since many of their products seem to still be made and designed by American workers and engineers.

Without companies like these doing real manufacturing, we as a nation lose our strategic ability to create the kinds of jobs where our middle class can earn a decent living. In this downward spiral, we lose the engineers and scientists of the future

who will be required to keep this country on innovation's leading edge through the commercial products we produce and the preparedness of our military.

We are the strongest nation, militarily and economically, the world has ever seen. We export not only goods, but good. We believe in human rights, democracy, and the amazing idea that it is one's efforts and hard work that earns a place at the table of freedom. Without our military – a military that technologically dominates friend and foe alike – we will become a third rate power and inevitably be forced to succumb to some future dictators. With that fate, the good that we export will be lost.

On a more positive note, I just might amaze you this month with a bit of out-of-character optimism. While I clearly do not hold out much hope from the assemblage of IT moguls in Silicon Valley, I do take sustenance from the efforts of our food equipment manufacturing industry.

I weigh about 250 pounds, so no one need remind me how important food is in this world. Besides energy and health care, what else consumes our dollars and effort more than food? I have recently returned from the bi-annual National Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers' convention in Orlando, and I must say that this made most of the other conventions I have attended look like a weekend flea market. Well, maybe Consumer Electronics is bigger, but that one is in Las Vegas and I am pretty sure most of the attendees are there just because they have an insane desire to throw money away at the slots.

Two pieces of good news from the food convention: There is an enormous amount of great engineering going on in this industry, and most of the manufacturing seems to be taking place right here in the United States.

As I wandered from booth to booth, I began to realize that when it comes to grills, freezers, holding pens, and the gear that cooks, prepares, and preserves your food in restaurants all over the country, it is being made right here in the U.S. by folks like Taylor, Duke, Prince Castle, and Alto Shaam.

Some of these companies do have "offshore" plants, but they seem to be using them for their Far East markets, and not for import back to the U.S. In addition, according to my non-scientific sample, these companies are not engineering their offshore units offshore; the designs are from here, whether the products were meant for here or not.

On the downside, I did not find much innovation "push" on the products being displayed at the conference. There was an "innovation" area, but it was a bit lame. A portable hot/cold case with a solar cell to generate power for the sensors just didn't cut it for me. When I started looking for "green" technology, however, I was thoroughly shocked by what I found and where it originated.

A cold case for bottled drink products may not sound like a big deal. It's a refrigerator for soda. So what, right? On the other hand, a more energy efficient cold case that goes into thousands of small mom and pop stores throughout Central

and South America and the rest of the developing world where energy is at a premium, now that is a big deal.

Imbera North America, a company based in Mexico and owned by the second largest Coca-Cola bottler in the world, has designed and is manufacturing a cold case that uses LED lighting, propane as a refrigerant, variable speed fans coupled to a variable speed compressor; super efficient insulation foamed with a non-CFC foaming agent, super insulated glass doors, and recycled steel. I am not sure how one can get more green, efficient, and innovative.

While Mexico is not the U.S., and the engineers are from Monterrey (not California), I will engage in a bit of Northern Hemispheric jingoism, and proclaim pride in their innovative work. I am just delighted that someone on the North American continent is innovating.

Perhaps our President is looking in the wrong place for innovation and guidance on education. When a country as poor as Mexico can turn out terrific, in-your-face innovation, manufactured by workers who are still striving for their version of a middle class life, and designed and created by engineers who didn't have the privilege of an MIT degree — maybe he should be asking us all: Why, when we have been granted so much, are we increasingly occupied with so little?

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