Are You a 'Worker' or an 'Employee'?

By JOEL HANS, Managing Editor, Manufacturing.net

In any given article about manufacturing, you'll perhaps see a few mentions of the company's "workers." Take a similar article about Google or Apple, for example, and you'll see a different reality. Instead of being powered by "workers," these technology giants have campuses populated by "employees," "engineers" and "ninjas" (a term that makes me cringe). Go to a Starbucks in the morning for a cup of coffee, and you'll not be dealing with a barista, but a Starbucks "partner."

For one reason or another, manufacturing is the only sector of American business that employs "workers." For such a generic title — its definition is essentially the same as "employee" — often I wonder how our industry has been stuck with one, while the service industry has a field day with the alternatives. And then, more importantly, why media and popular culture continue to perpetuate it?

If you're never heard Mike Rowe (of *Dirty Jobs* fame) talk about the public value of "work" in America, here's the gist: Over the last few decades, in particular, there has been an unfocused, but incredibly powerful marketing campaign against work done with one's hands, in favor of "high-tech" and "future-thinking" jobs like software development, or most anything service-related. I can't agree more with Rowe's opinion, and I think that's half of the problem with this "worker" vs. "employee" debate.

Even though I've talked with hundreds of manufacturing professionals and am very familiar with their success, the term "worker" has a negative connotation to me. It's almost impossible to break, despite all the evidence to the contrary. The semantics of work are indoctrinated into each new generation.

Some people may be perfectly fine with being called a "worker." Perhaps they even take pride in it. And others would say a title isn't important, regardless of whether

it's a positive or negative connotation. Someone else may not want to be called an "employee." Those are perfectly valid opinions, but it appears to me that Rowe's philosophy — that popular media is perpetuating a myth — is begin validated on a daily basis. Popular culture is pushing away great swaths of potential manufacturing workers through mislabeled semantics. They're saying, "Why would I want to be a worker when I can be a partner? Or a ninja?"

It's hard not to understand their position, particularly when you consider that they've never been exposed to what manufacturing is really like in the 21st Century. They have antiquated ideas of what jobs are available. There are few to no outlets for people to get experience with manufacturing equipment, and the deficiency of proper STEM education has been an issue for decades. They don't know that manufacturing isn't all manual labor. They don't realize it's an art in the combination of science and engineering.

I don't necessarily have any solutions, here — I've been tossing this idea around in my head for a year now, probably — but I feel obligated to speak up, being so closely tied to the media world that shapes public opinion. Part of me says that the "worker" label is antiquated, and that whenever I can, I should use "employee" or some other equal term. But another part of me thinks that if we're going to get our next generations into manufacturing, it's going to take a whole lot more than a title change. Work is work, and it's always going to be hard to convince a teenager that getting dirty is what pays the bills.

What do you think? I'd like to hear from you on this issue. I can think about it all I want, but you're the people that it will affect in the end. Would you like the "worker" label changed to something else? What would your alternatives be? Do you take pride in being a "worker"? What do you think future manufacturing employees want to hear?

Most importantly: Am I making a mountain out of a molehill, here? Sound off below. Or send comments to joel.hans@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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