A Manufacturing History Lesson

By JONNATHA MAYBERRY, Associate Editor, *Chem.Info*

This week, a metal worker made headline news. But this worker didn't make headlines because of the quality of her craft or the dedication she showed on the job — she made headlines because she's, well, a she.

The skeletal remains of a female metal worker have been found in a grave in Vienna dating back to the Bronze Age (which began more than 5,000 years ago). Previously, it was assumed that only men worked in such fields during the Bronze Age.

The Austrian museum that announced the discovery drew its conclusion from the fact that "examination of the skull and lower jaw bone shows the skeleton is of a woman" and "tools used to make metal ornaments were also found in the grave," according to the Associated Press [1].

If the remains really belonged to a female metal worker, the museum definitely dug up some fascinating historical dirt. In turn, I dug up some questions.

Today, it is well-known that women work in the manufacturing field, but it is also well-known that women are greatly outnumbered by men on the factory floor. “According to the National Association of Manufacturers, about a third of all manufacturing workers today are women,” CNN Money *[2]* reports.

“‘The stereotype is that factory jobs require a lot of heavy lifting,’” explains Diana Peters, who runs Symbol Job Training, a manufacturing trade school, with her husband. But Peters believes that these stereotypes are outdated. “‘It’s the complete opposite. So much of manufacturing today is high-tech and computerized. Women can do these jobs and be very successful.’”

And while many women can handle heavy lifting, it does seem that the manufacturing environment is evolving into an atmosphere that is much more inviting to some, and this development may not only usher in a new era for female manufacturers, but also for manufacturing as a whole.

Lori and Traci Tapani, co-presidents of Wyoming Machine Inc., “are part of a budding movement to attract more women into an industry that has been a bright spot in the economic recovery,” according to the Star Tribune *[3]*. “The Tapanis go to schools and job fairs to encourage more students to consider manufacturing, a career they say offers plenty of opportunity and reward.”

Could an influx of women into the manufacturing industry help meet skilled labor shortages? Many, including the Peters and the Tapanis, believe the answer is yes, but that doesn’t mean that women who enter the manufacturing field are always welcomed with open arms.

“‘Some guys have a hard time being instructed by a woman,’” says April Senase, who runs high-tech machinery at a factory and also teaches night classes at Symbol Job Training. “‘They'd say to me, ‘Why do you want to do this? You're going to get dirty.’”

Just as archaeologists uncovered the remains of the female metal worker, perhaps we should remove the dust from our long-held stereotypes about what it takes to be a manufacturer.

Not all women would want or enjoy a manufacturing job (the same goes for men). But for women such as Senase, their passion for their job makes it easier to brush off unwelcome comments or stereotypes. And, in my opinion, zealous employees make the best employees.

Would more women in manufacturing help remedy labor shortages, or are our long-held beliefs solidified for a reason? Let me know your thoughts by emailing me at jonnatha.mayberry@advantagemedia.com *[4].*

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