

The Shifting Workplace Culture of Manufacturing

It is sad to say the popularity of a career in manufacturing, a former mainstay of employment, has waned substantially with the shortage of a skilled industrial workforce over the past few decades. Now, as the generation known as the Baby Boomers increasingly settles into retirement, the need to attract and retain a younger manufacturing workforce cannot be ignored.

Those of us in the manufacturing industries have long fought against the rising tide of the skilled workforce shortage, and, while the issue is pressing, it also prompts a thoughtful look at the reasons for this problem and opportunities to turn it around.



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Training and education are a key elements in attracting new workforce members. By being presented with a number of potential career modules, such as those offered in Design Mark's "Corridor to College" program for high schoolers, novice employees can experience various aspects of today's manufacturing industry. The program offers an opportunity for those starting on their career path to work in several different capacities within Design Mark, providing a chance to identify and select their most fulfilling employment "corridor."

Many high schools have assimilated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) programs into their curriculum. The ongoing national push toward these fields of study dovetails with the need to introduce manufacturing jobs to the next generation of workers, as all five elements of a STEAM program are essential to a career in manufacturing. In addition to skilled production workers, engineers are needed to ensure next levels of innovation and technique, while design and packaging of end products require the expertise of those with artistic backgrounds.

The message that must be delivered to young people beginning their careers or looking to make a change is that there is more going on behind the scenes in manufacturing companies than they realize. From marketing to sales, design to production, manufacturers need to essentially rebrand a career in manufacturing so that it showcases the many opportunities it offers.

Manufacturers must demonstrate to the next generation of workers the many updated business-to-business strategies and technological advances embraced by the manufacturing industries and how these mechanisms attract new customers. We also want future employees watch our designers and engineers create innovative projects and to see first hand exactly how the production staff works its magic.

And there is plenty of "magic" in the world of manufacturing these days. The integration of automation and robotics with more "old school" practices have opened up doors for a younger workforce whose lives, in large part, have been influenced and shaped by technology.

But despite the technological advances embraced, the shortage of candidates looking for a career in manufacturing remains a sticking point. There still exists a false perception by some that a career in manufacturing is a throwback to days gone by. Those of us in the industry need to take the lead in mitigating this inaccuracy and here is where a healthy company culture can come into play.

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Whether orchestrated or not, every company has – or eventually creates – its own culture. A strong company culture is one that appreciates and empowers employees. It extends way beyond the occasional “pizza party” day or annual recognition programs, and often a culture that resonates is the key to attracting and retaining talented employees, particularly among those of the millennial generation, whose focus on the work-life balance has been the subject of many articles.

To some, a good work-life balance can equate to flexible hours; to others it could mean access to many workplace perks. Unlike the Baby Boomer generation, millennials, generally speaking, are not looking for a one- or two-job career. They are not as easily “scared off” as their older counterparts by what might be considered job-hopping. Therefore, having a pulse on what the younger generation wants from a job or career is essential. Workplace flexibility, an engaging mission statement (mission is a very popular term among millennials!) and plenty of small benefits (think bagel Friday, foosball tables in the break room) can go a long way toward altering the next generation of workers’ perceptions about a career in manufacturing.

Company culture in today’s competitive marketplace should be front and center during the recruiting process. While recruiting via online sites has become standard, it’s critical for a manufacturing company’s website to include comprehensive information about specific job openings and should also include material that speaks to the company’s sense of culture and values. The importance of a thorough job description cannot be overstated. Here is the chance to describe the job’s parameters, the extent of skills required and the benefits of working with your company. Those advantages might include advancement opportunities or the chance to work with high-technology equipment – the idea is to attract candidates who will be excited about the role they will play within your business.

Unfortunately, there is no quick fix to overcoming the challenges created by the manufacturing industry’s skills gap. Multiple strategies are required to return manufacturing careers to their rightful place of honor. Innovative talent sourcing and recruiting strategies, updated branding mechanisms, and robust company cultures are essential to refining the antiquated image of manufacturing. The bottom line to the skilled labor shortage is the need for manufacturing companies to acknowledge the perceptions and fulfill the desires and wants of the next generation of workers. Their future, and ours, depends on it.

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