



# Workforce at Risk: Addressing the Jewelry Industry's Skilled Labor Shortage

## Roundtable Discussion on Challenges and Solutions

**Date:** Saturday May 17, 2025

**Location:** The Jewelry Symposium. Troy, MI

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### I. Opening Remarks

- The session aimed to identify **challenges** faced by different segments of the jewelry industry in **attracting and retaining workers**.
- Participants were encouraged to speak openly, share perspectives, and postpone discussion of solutions until later in the meeting.

### II. Common Challenges Identified

#### 1. Hiring & Retention Difficulties

- **Attitude Over Skill:** Employers are finding it harder to find workers with the right **attitude and work ethic**, despite trainable skill sets.
- **Lack of Interest:** Many candidates lack genuine interest in long-term careers, particularly in manufacturing and craftsmanship roles.
- **High Turnover:** Workers often treat jobs as temporary or side hustles rather than career paths.

#### 2. Generational Differences

- **Generational Perceptions:** There are some negative stereotypes about the younger generations, which aren't accurate or fair and which create a divide between older employers and younger employees. Eliminating those stereotypes would be an important step to inter-generational communication and hiring.

- **Lack of Manual Skills:** Many younger individuals haven't been trained in manual or craft-based work due to the educational system's emphasis on technology and academics.
- **Disconnect with Trades:** Goldsmithing and jewelry-making are not widely perceived as attractive or sustainable career paths.

### 3. Educational System Misalignment

- **University Programs:** Many jewelry programs emphasize **art and entrepreneurship**, not craftsmanship or trades.
- **Lack of Vocational Training:** There is a lack of technical and trade-focused training programs in the U.S. and other countries.
- **Institutional Challenges:** Art departments often don't recognize jewelry as a legitimate technical discipline; programs face underfunding or closure.

### 4. Wage & Competition Issues

- **Wages in Other Industries:** Comparable or higher wages in unrelated industries (e.g., retail, casinos) make jewelry roles less appealing.
- **Unsustainable Pay Expectations:** Competitive salaries for skilled roles (e.g., \$80k–\$200k for experienced jewelers) are straining businesses.

### 5. Industry Perception

- **Craft as “Uncool”:** Manual trades are perceived as boring or outdated compared to tech or design careers.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Many don't know jewelry careers exist, or what they involve.

## III. International Perspectives

- **Thailand:** Multiple programs exist, but there's still a shortage of skilled labor. Fashion attracts more interest than jewelry.
- **Mexico & Latin America:** High turnover among craftsmen; long-term workers often have family connections to the trade.
- **Germany:** Structured apprenticeship model provides long-term training with legal protections for both parties.
- **China & Turkey:** Large-scale programs exist; demand remains strong due to historical and cultural connections to jewelry.

## IV. Potential Solutions and Ideas

### 1. Training & Apprenticeships

- **In-House Training:** Companies should build structured internal training and apprenticeships (e.g., 2-year programs, progressive leveling).
- **Cross-Training:** Staff trained in multiple roles to increase engagement and versatility.
- **Internships & Early Exposure:** Summer jobs, high school engagement, and bootcamps to introduce youth to the trade.

## 2. Culture & Engagement

- **Employee Inclusion:** Involving craftspeople in design meetings and decisions creates pride and a sense of ownership.
- **Transparent Communication:** Regular one-on-ones, experience reviews, and educational stipends to support personal growth.
- **Recognition Programs:** Offering substantial rewards (e.g., high-value jewelry, bonuses) for contributions and ideas.

## 3. Educational Partnerships

- **Trade School Engagement:** Support for technical schools that focus on polishing, setting, casting, etc.
- **Outreach to Schools:** High schools and community colleges can be engaged to build interest early.
- **University Collaboration:** Encourage industry to communicate workforce needs clearly to academic institutions.

## 4. Organizational and Policy Actions

- **Industry Associations:** Push MJSA, Jewelers of America, and others to prioritize training and workforce development. (MJSA already working on this with MAP)
- **Public Image Campaigns:** Elevate the image of goldsmithing as comparable in value to electricians or plumbers.
- **Scholarships from Companies:** Youth respond better to industry-funded scholarships than institutional ones.

## 5. Shift in Business Practices

- **Front/Back House Integration:** End the divide between sales and technical staff—showcase the makers.
- **Value-Driven Branding:** Promote sustainability and inclusivity, values that resonate with Gen Z and Gen Alpha.
- **Rethink Hierarchies:** Provide growth paths for every role—even polishers and setters—not just designers and sales staff.

## V. Concluding Thoughts

- There is **widespread consensus** that the industry must evolve in how it recruits, trains, and retains talent.
- **Industry-wide collaboration** is essential—between employers, educators, and associations.
- Continued dialogue, active mentorship, and systemic change are key to sustaining and revitalizing the craft.