

Manufacturing, an Honorable Vocation

By Stephen Hannemann

Have you noticed lately the technology sector has been laying off thousands upon thousands of its workforce while our manufacturing industries across the spectrum can't find the workforce needed to keep up? Politics aside, my high school economics teacher was right when 60 plus years ago he said, "If a country's economy is not based on making something or growing something, it is not creating a sustainable economy." So, after decades of indoctrinating our young people that, for some reason, blue collar work is substandard and you need a college degree to make it in life, we find ourselves in the predicament of a diminished industrial labor force. So, what's the answer?



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One answer would be industry needs to do a better job of marketing the notion that making things is an honorable and noble vocation! Notice I didn't use the term JOB. Technology has changed the face of manufacturing to something almost unrecognizable since I began an apprenticeship in 1960.

I remember a couple of craftsmen who wore white shirts and ties under their smocks. My, how things have changed! It is not a complaint but positive observation. I also remember in 1972 when HP introduced their electronic slide rule. Mathematically speaking, it did everything but sweep my bench!

Technology has remarkably kept the United States of America chugging

along, competitive in most manufacturing areas of our economy, save consumer goods. But there is room for improvement. A new infusion of an eager, committed, and prideful workforce is needed in our manufacturing base. Men and women who again take pride in making things. This is not a quick fix. However, many of the companies I represent are accomplishing this beautifully. Conversely, many companies often need to revamp their strategies on how to attract and invest in expanding their teams. Not just making their businesses look appealing, but reinforcing the fact that their employees know they are the company's most valuable asset, and they can take pride in being part of an honorable profession. This will take time and patience.

All of us at one time or another have made something. For young people today, maybe not so much, with the advent of handheld electronic games and such. It seems that Erector Sets, Lincoln Logs, and Tinker Toys have long been kicked to the curb. But it's really not too late. Grades 6 through 12 are filled with soon to be young men and women who if were shown in proper context the adventures of making and creating useful things, they would respond in positive ways beyond our wildest expectations. But it must begin now.



Photo courtesy of 3D Plastics

The manufacturing sector needs to get involved now more than ever in our education system. Lobby the school districts to bring back field trips. Create attractive videos that present the magic of making useful products. Presentations that explain the training program and the timeline to achieving the full wage and benefits package. Highlight how these future young manufacturing stars will be earning a living right out of the shoot, and not incurring thousands upon thousands of dollars of debt for 4 years before they can even look for work.

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