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Skilled workers in demand

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Like Lindsay Lohan, the manufacturing employment sector could use a little good PR about now.

People think manufacturing jobs are dirty, said Walter "Val" Zanchuk, president of Graphicast Inc., a Jaffrey company that produces precision metal parts.

Other misconceptions include that manufacturing involves poor working conditions, he said, and an assembly line mentality.

Children might think of parents whose jobs were replaced by outsourced positions in India, said Donna M. Marcin, human resources manager at Peterborough's N.H. Ball Bearings Inc.

And with many manufacturing jobs heading overseas, some — according to research analyst Anita I. Josten of N.H. Employment Security's Economic and Labor Market Information Bureau — are hesitant to enter a field when they're unsure about its future.

The result? Dwindling pools of skilled applicants, say local manufacturing firms and experts, which in turn infuses the industry with even more insecurity.

"Unfortunately, the attitude among parents and among teachers — and among the public in general — is that, well, these industries are dying," said Zanchuk. "You don't want to get involved in them because you won't have a job. And that's not true, but it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

A shambles


Victor C. Kissell, operations manager at Tidland Corp. in Keene, described the current skilled labor market as in shambles.

"Over the years, our education system hasn't kept up with the career paths that are required or needed by industry in New Hampshire," he said.



The N.H. Manufacturing Extension Partnership's Machine Operator Skills Training mobile unit sits in front of Tidland Corp. in Keene Wednesday.

STEVE HOOPER / Sentinel Staff



Work ethic is low, he said, skilled workers are aging out of New Hampshire's graying labor force, and there aren't enough younger workers with the manufacturing interest or training to replace them.

In addition, Kissell said, he's seeing people lacking proficiency in basic academic skills such as mathematics.


Tidland has had to hire entry-level employees with almost no experience, Kissell said, often training workers from the ground up.

"There's an evolution in manufacturing in most companies, where you bring people in at these lower-level positions and you move them up," he said. But, it's a time-consuming and resource-intensive way to build a company's labor force.

"Bottom line is, you need the higher-level guy to start with," he said. "The process is a lot longer to get the person you need."

Charles T. Lennon, vice president of Len-Tex Corp. — a manufacturer of commercial wall coverings — said his firm has always had to train its own employees because its required skills are so specific.

If anything, he said, the emerging workforce seems better equipped with computer knowledge.



But at N.H. Ball Bearings, Marcin described similar problems to those at Tidland.

"It's been developing for the last couple of years, I would say, and it continues to worsen."

Three to four years ago, the company responded to the skills gap by introducing a more formalized, in-house training program, she said.

"We do it because it's necessary," Marcin said, describing company volunteers who devote part of their workdays to training their colleagues.

The company has been proactive in trying to find and attract new workers, according to Marcin, through a variety of means — including extensive advertising, offering high benefits and wages, hosting and attending job fairs and working with local high schools to try to foster an interest in manufacturing skills.

"We do everything that we possibly can, and all of it combined comes short," she said. "And how are we dealing with that? Well, you know, we keep spinning our wheels."

The Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire recently completed a series of roundtables — meetings of business minds — throughout the state.



"This issue (of a constricting labor pool) has come up in all or nearly

all of the 14 roundtables, which is the first time that's happened in my three years here," said BIA President James "Jim" Roche.

"This issue hasn't been raised by only manufacturers or only high-tech companies," he said. "That tells me, anecdotally, this is an emerging issue across the board."

Acute local need

It's also an issue across the country, according to Josten.

"I don't know that it's specifically only New Hampshire," she said, of the pinch in skilled manufacturers. "It is national."

As of 2005 — and again in 2007 — about 80 percent of members of the National Association of Manufacturers said they had job openings they were having trouble filling with qualified workers, according to Heath A. Weems, director of education and workforce policy.

Locally, plenty of manufacturing companies are doing well, according to Zanchuk.

But fears of a dying industry can still come to play, some say, in part because of the wider industry's outsourcing of manufacturing jobs to other countries.

When smaller, lower-skilled tasks are moved offshore, according to Josten, this can negatively impact the public's perception of the industry's future even while skilled workers are still needed domestically.

But while this is a national problem, people at some local firms say the Monadnock Region feels its own acute impact.

"The whole state of New Hampshire is in the higher levels with an aging workforce," said Kissell.

Beyond this, many described the local pool of skilled manufacturers as actually further strained by the area's economic strength.

Unemployment in the region is low — at 3.4 percent in Keene and 18 surrounding towns in May, according to a recent N.H. Employment Security report, compared to 4.3 percent nationally — which would intuitively shrink the pool of eligible manufacturing workers.

Roche said he thinks statewide the labor force is actually growing, but not at a fast-enough rate to meet demand.

"In New Hampshire we have a healthy economy," Roche said. "Many (companies) are growing and need to hire people, and that's where they're beginning to run up against this issue of accessing qualified labor."

Tidland has expanded over the last couple of years, Kissell said, and

is hiring additional employees as a result.

"Growth is a good thing, which we're experiencing," he said, "but when you talk about trying to hire new employees, it's the toughest thing about growth ... when we started this expansion project about 2 1/2 years ago, the company was seriously thinking about moving out of the state."

Despite troubles with labor, N.H. Ball Bearings is also growing, Marcin said.

"Our business is doing very well. We're trying to expand," she said, but the difficulty finding and keeping labor is limiting that growth's pace.

Meanwhile, Kissell said, Cheshire County lacks enough manufacturing training facilities or programs to really combat these problems.

"There's a lot of opportunity out there for people who want (a) change in career," Kissell said. "But there's no path to get them here."

Training efforts

However, some say, the future's looking brighter.

One initiative to train a new generation of manufacturers is the Machine Operator Skills Training program now being offered for the second time in Keene through a partnership between the Keene office of Employment Security and the N.H. Manufacturing Extension Partnership.


Funded by a Department of Labor grant, the program is currently providing free training to 12 unemployed people — selected through the Keene office of Employment Security. In a bus equipped with computers and computer numerical control (CNC) machines, participants are given basic manufacturing skills hiring companies can build on.

At the end of the two-week program, trainees will interview for positions at Tidland, Lake Machine in Claremont and N.H. Industries in Lebanon.

The Cheshire Career Center at Keene High School offers programs in machine tool, electronics and industrial communications and also places students in internships with local firms, according to director James F. Logan.

These internships span academic areas, Logan said, but the majority are in manufacturing.

With the help of Keene Community Education, the Cheshire Career Center and the Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce, according to Janice H. Barry, director of community education for the Keene



School District, area companies have collaborated to provide training to current employees.

Courses have included shop-floor mathematics, blueprint reading, manual machining and CNC operator courses, said Barry.


Meanwhile, locally, Kissell said, the Workforce Development Committee of the Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce is looking at pulling together area educational resources — such as Keene State College, Keene Community Education and N.H. Community Technical College — to potentially develop a local associate's degree program in manufacturing-related subjects.

Regardless, Marcin stressed the need for collaboration between New Hampshire's business, education and legislative leaders.

In addition, many said, high school students should be made more aware that within the manufacturing industry, there's great opportunity.

But Kimberly L. Ougrabe, 23, of Keene — who completed Keene's last machine-operator skills training program in June — said she already grasps this.

"I know it's a really good business to get into because it's always going to be needed," said Ougrabe, who now works at Tidland as a machine apprentice.



Current student Shane M. Perry, 25, of Fitzwilliam said he was interested in having knowledge in a field that's growing and needs people to fill it.

Sitting at the front of the M.O.S.T. training bus Wednesday, Kissell said there's two stories of local manufacturing: the strain to find skilled workers and the promise of programs such as the machine operator skills training program.

"This," he said of the latter, "is good stuff."

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