How Do We Solve The Worker Shortage?

By Mike Collins

This is Part 2 of last month's column on the problem of manufacturing's skilled worker shortage. Click here for a Part 1 refresher. *[1] This month, Mike Collins outlines possible shortage solutions:*
The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says that by 2010 the number of unfilled skilled worker jobs will reach 5.3 million, increasing to 14 million by 2015. The report shows that shortages of skilled workers are most serious for machinists, craft workers, technicians, electricians and engineers. There will also be shortages of white-collar jobs that require both technical skills and a college degree. So, what can we do to train the people we need?

Education: K-12

There is not enough effort to offer the training and skill classes that lead to getting a job or finding a career, for those kids who can't or won't go to college.
Here is my suggestion:

- To improve science, math, and English through remedial training sponsored by the manufacturers as a condition of employment, when the goal is to improve practical use of the subjects.
- To change the curriculum to emphasize more skills; we need to get back to offering shop classes and methods to teach kids by using their hands.

Parents, Teachers, and Counselors

To successfully make any changes to education is going to require changing the mindset of parents, teachers and counselors.
Here is my suggestion:

- Help parents, teachers, students and counselors understand that skilled manufacturing jobs (both blue and white collar) are technology jobs that pay well and can be a good career investment.
- To convince people that working with your hands in a manufacturing job could be a better career choice than most service or "knowledge worker" jobs.

Vocational Schools and Community Colleges

We desperately need to get more funding to vocational schools and vocational classes because they provide:

- A curriculum that combines technical education, technical training and general education.
- Industry-specific job training for companies which can be delivered either at

their sites or the college.
- A combination of education, hands-on training and work experiences that will prepare the students for long-term success in the workplace.

Universities and 4-Year Colleges
K-12 and community colleges have evolved to “college prep” programs for universities to educate students for white-collar jobs. The problem is that about half of the graduates get general degrees and do not have skills to get a family wage job.
Here is my suggestion:

- Combine the academic courses with skill training courses that will help any graduate secure some kind of decent paying job.
- Have 4-year colleges give college credits for skill classes, which would help the general degree graduate gain some skills to at least begin in manufacturing.

Apprentice Training
Government agencies often overlook or ignore an even more critical need for training beyond entry-level positions— what used to be referred to as “apprenticeship training.” This is the in-depth skill training that is needed to turn a manufacturing job into a high paid career path.
NIMS (National Institute for Metalworking Skills) has launched a new competency-based Apprenticeship System for the nation’s metalworking industry. Developed in partnership with the United States Department of Labor, the new system is the result of two years of work. Over 300 companies participated in the deliberations and design.
Here is my suggestion:

- The Labor Department should expand this program to every state. Apprentice programs will give us the new skilled workers that can compete with any country in the world.

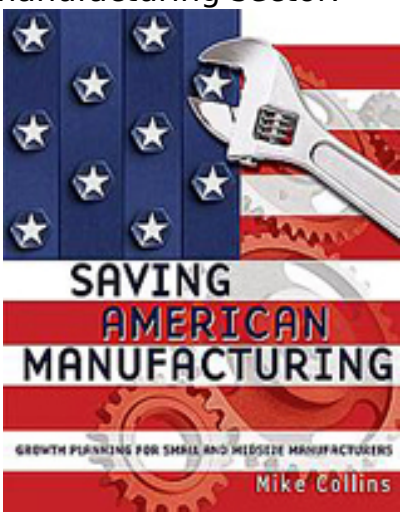
Manufacturing’s Image
The biggest challenge for improving education and training, in my opinion, is that it is difficult to convince students, parents, and teachers that manufacturing is a good career. Here is my suggestion:

- Manufacturing must convince the public that they want to stay in America and want to maintain a strong manufacturing sector with good suppliers.
- The large manufacturers must play a role in addressing the issues of trust, security, and loyalty if they are going to change the public’s mind about manufacturing.

In his 35 years in manufacturing, Mike Collins has helped companies make the transition from being defenders—focused on process change and cost-cutting—to prospectors—focused on finding new markets and profitable growth.

Conclusion

It is this author's opinion that the manufacturing sector must grow for the good of the entire economy. It can't grow unless we can train and educate enough skilled workers that are needed in the next decade. The government is going to have to invest a lot more money into manufacturing training if they want a strong manufacturing sector.



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In his 35 years in manufacturing—including corporate positions from salesman to

VP, and extensive consulting with the NIST Manufacturing Extension Partnership—Mike Collins has helped companies make the transition from being "Defender" organizations focused internally, on process change and cost-cutting, to "Prospector" companies focused externally, on finding new markets and profitable growth. His new book, ***Saving American Manufacturing****, is a comprehensive step-by-step strategy that demonstrates how to ultimately become an organization that will continuously find new opportunities in today's fast-changing global economy.*

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