

U.S. Manufacturing Jobs: Not So Cozy Anymore

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Honesty compels me to admit, I think a lot of people have their heads in the clouds when it comes to the current relationship between manufacturing and jobs.

Just recently, President Obama earmarked \$500 million to spur the development of high-tech manufacturing jobs. Meanwhile, cruise the blogosphere or surf your cable lineup at any point and you'll find any number of people -- from pundits to politicians -- clamoring for a renewed emphasis on manufacturing.

Why? "Because that's where the jobs are."

Hey, I take a back seat to no one when it comes to appreciating the role that manufacturing plays in this country's economy. But then again, anyone who believes that a pronounced uptick in this country's manufacturing output will immediately translate into a full-scale spike in job growth, just doesn't understand the fundamentals of manufacturing.

U.S. manufacturing these days is in the midst of a remarkable three-year recovery because for three years running manufacturing has not been about job growth.

It's been about automation. It's been about process improvement. It's been about productivity. And it's been about quality.

In fact, it's been about reinventing the very process by which durable and disposable goods get manufactured.

What's more, it's been about streamlining our factories to the point that they're now

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

among the most efficient in the world.

That's why America's manufacturing sector has achieved such a dramatic turnaround, and that's why our economy is slowly but surely working its way down the long road to recovery.

American manufacturers, like myself, simply have not been able to compete with the ridiculously low salaries being paid to workers in places like China and India. So we've had to try to one-up the offshore competition by out-innovating it, while at the same time embracing such things as computer design, laser technology, lean manufacturing and other recent game-changing manufacturing innovations.

Look, I know where those politicians and pundits are coming from when they call for a renewed emphasis on manufacturing. And most of them are right.

But they're right for the wrong reasons. They say the word "manufacturing" and they see in their minds' eyes things they used to see when they were kids.

They see workers lined up outside of a sprawling industrial campus, with its belching smokestacks and its massive storage facilities.

And they see thousands upon thousands of jobs, all paying the kind of wages that allow a man to send two or three kids to college, while leaving enough left over for him and the little lady to have a night out on the town every now and then.

Well, I hate to say it. But those days are gone. And those jobs are gone. What's more, as Bruce Springsteen once sang, "they ain't comin' back."

That's not to say, of course, that manufacturing growth will not continue to translate into meaningful job growth -- and meaningful careers -- in this country. Because it will.

It's just that it won't translate into the massive quantities of jobs people still want to believe are possible. Nor will it translate into the kind of low-skilled jobs that once defined the assembly line dynamic.

In this day and age, companies like mine simply cannot afford to pay top dollar for workers whose skill sets do not extend beyond the ability to spot weld a piece of metal or maybe torque down a bolt or two.

Today's lean manufacturing companies are looking for skilled workers who think like engineers and who bring to the job each day a broad knowledge of product design and product development.

Today, small, independent businessmen like myself are not so much looking for manufacturing cogs as we are manufacturing assets; people whose skills are essential to the process of designing, prototyping and manufacturing products for market.

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America's economic future will remain forever linked to our ability to manufacture quality goods. But the minute we start focusing more on this country's ability to manufacture jobs than we do our ability to manufacture things is the minute we step out onto what promises to be a very slippery slope.

The great economist Milton Friedman was once visiting a developing country. He watched as hundreds of workers used shovels to build a bridge. When he asked why they were using shovels rather than machines, his host said, "Because using machinery would result in fewer jobs in the construction industry."

Oh," Friedman replied, "I thought you were interested in building a bridge. If you want to create more jobs, why not give the workers spoons instead of shovels?"

Manufacturing blogger Perry Sainati has been hanging around machine shops since he was a little boy. He is the founder and CEO of Belden Universal, a manufacturer of high-quality, one-of-a-kind specialty couplings. Read more of Perry's thoughts on [The Belden Blog](#) [1], or visit [Belden Universal](#) [2] to see what his company offers.

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