

Grainger CEO Talks Tools for Tomorrow

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As the required skill set for advanced manufacturing continues to evolve, many resources emerge to address workforce development needs in the industry. James Ryan, CEO of industrial distribution leader, Grainger, sat down with IMPO to discuss ways in which technical education has been a continued priority for his business — and why the skilled trades have more to offer than many people realize.

Q: Which characteristics of careers in the trades do you believe are most misunderstood? Which characteristics to these types of jobs do you see as the most appealing?



One of the biggest misconceptions is that a job within the trades is not a career. In reality, the positions available today and in the future offer exciting, long-term opportunities that require advanced problem-solving skills, science, technology, and math knowledge. There's also a perception that these positions don't offer financial stability when in reality, they are well-paying and support industries that are increasingly stable. For example, an electrician can make upwards of \$80,000/year and careers in HVAC are listed as #9 among the top 10 jobs for future hiring, according to data from the Department of Labor.

In addition, careers within the trades are hotbeds for innovative thinking and are now part of exciting, cutting edge industries. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), Green industries currently create about 8.5 million jobs in the United States, and as many as 1 out of 4 workers in the United States will be working in renewable energy or energy efficiency industries by 2030.

It's easy to see how someone can quickly realize that a career in the trades can offer stable, yet challenging, well-paying opportunities in innovative fields that have

often been overlooked or undervalued because of simple misconceptions.

Q: Do you feel the recession (and subsequent unemployment) has changed the way people view jobs in the industrial sector? How so?

The rise in unemployment caused people who otherwise wouldn't have considered a job in the trades to think twice and realize the potential of a career in the industrial sector, whether it's a recent high school graduate looking to start a career, or someone in the workforce for more than 20 years.

For example, I'm reminded of one of our recent Grainger Tools for Tomorrow® Scholarship Program recipients, Ed. His story really resonated with me because I found it to be so inspirational and representative of how the opportunities in the industrial sector can change someone's life. The former cement finisher is pursuing a second associate's degree at Joliet Junior College while he works nights, operating locks on Illinois rivers for the Army Corps of Engineers. He says he has opportunities for advancement there and a steady paycheck — things missing in his construction days. He has a degree in industrial maintenance technology and is working on one in electrical automation systems. Ed won a scholarship at Joliet through Grainger's Tools for Tomorrow scholarship program, which offers \$2,000 toward tuition at community colleges nationwide, and tool kits to help students finish their degrees and get started in technical jobs.

Q: In your opinion, what is the role of industrial manufacturers and distributors in helping to develop the workforce of tomorrow?

Finding qualified candidates with strong analytical skills and industrial training remains one of manufacturing's biggest challenges. For decades, industry leaders have talked about how jobs in the skilled trades are vital to the economic health of our local communities. Now is the time for renewed energy around championing the value of a well-trained domestic workforce.

At Grainger, we have developed partnerships that help us serve as a bridge between skilled labor talent and the industry. In 2006, in partnership with the AACC, Grainger launched The Grainger Tools for Tomorrow scholarship program to help qualified technical education students successfully graduate with a skilled trade degree and prepare for the workforce. Grainger offers 200 scholarships at 100 community colleges across the country, with a focus on veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces. Community colleges and local partnerships are vital to developing the workforce of tomorrow.

Industrial manufacturers and distributors also have a unique perspective on the trades through their supplier and customer base. Building awareness of the careers available is vital to creating a pipeline of talent. Grainger also worked with the AACC to develop Trades in Focus, to promote awareness on the importance of industrial-trade professions, highlight the corresponding training and skills that community colleges offer, and underscore the opportunities for good jobs that industrial skilled-trade programs provide.

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It is efforts like these that will help develop and secure the workforce of tomorrow.

Q: How have initiatives like Grainger's Tools for Tomorrow scholarship program been beneficial in targeting and improving industrial skill gaps?

Education is critical, however, community college drop-out rates are high, which has contributed to the skilled labor issues we are facing. The Grainger Tools for Tomorrow scholarship program targets those students in the final year of education and not only offers financial support to help them pay for tuition, but also provides them with a customized Westward® toolkit upon graduation to help them successfully launch their professional careers.

We hear from Tools for Tomorrow "alumni" nationwide, such as Trevor Van Brunt, who reinforce the importance of this program:

"I want to say thanks for the incredible generosity Grainger showed me. I could not have made it through college without the Grainger Tools for Tomorrow scholarship program," said Van Brunt, 2010 Grainger Tools for Tomorrow scholarship recipient and graduate of Cincinnati State and Technical College. "I now have a good job in the medical equipment industry as a field service technician. I am making good use of the Westward toolkit, and I am still impressed by Grainger's generosity."

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