

# Attracting Talent: A Lesson In Battling Perception

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*Manufacturers must lead the charge in workforce development to engage young professionals*



In 2011, 50 percent of engineering students participating in a Booz & Company survey said they regarded manufacturing as an attractive career option. Meanwhile, 73 percent of brand owners taking part in a qualitative Manufacturing Excellence Share Group panel developed by the Alliance for Innovation & Operational Excellence (AIOE) said the most difficult skill to find in today's production workforce is the ability to solve problems.

This disconnect between perception and reality has made it challenging for food manufacturers to place young professionals in engaging, stable positions that require strong mechatronics skills and problem-solving capabilities, as well as a background in math and science. But why does this disconnect exist? Part of it is cultural. Since the 1970s, generations of parents have urged their children to pursue four-year college degrees. High schools are evaluated on the number of students they send to college — regardless of whether they become gainfully employed thereafter. Additionally, jobs in the manufacturing sector have been labeled unskilled and unstable after decades of shipping labor overseas and increasing automation.

While it is important for the industry to recognize and learn from the events that have led manufacturers to this predicament, it is even more critical to prioritize a solution. Despite the common preconceived notion that increasingly automated operations are eliminating opportunities in the manufacturing sector, the widespread adoption of advanced production technologies is actually creating

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opportunities — and demand — for more skilled professionals.

### Employing the right resources

Organizations like PMMI continue to pursue the development of new tools and educational partnerships to engage today's students with the aim of building tomorrow's workforce. For example, PMMI's credentialing initiative identifies in-demand technical skills and creates tests to evaluate individuals in those areas. For students that are uncertain of what capabilities are needed, the tests provide clarity and measurement outside of a more nebulous mainstream educational criteria.

JumPPstart, another PMMI initiative, provides equipment and supplier member companies, along with their customers, with an avenue to connect with secondary school students locally. Companies that take advantage of this program are encouraged to invite students on tours of their facilities or sponsor a team in a FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics Competition. Contests like these are coordinated with FIRST — or FIRST educational partners — and often conducted at industry events, such as [PACK EXPO Las Vegas 2013 \(September 23-25; Las Vegas Convention Center\)](#) [1].

The show also hosts the Amazing Packaging Race, where participating exhibitors each contribute \$500 to the PMMI Education & Training Foundation that finances scholarships for students at technical colleges as well as provides travel scholarships for 200-300 students to attend PACK EXPO. The teams of students race around the show floor, interacting with exhibitors to gather points by completing tasks at specific PACK EXPO booths.

These are just some of the resources available to industry players as a means of educating and interacting with students to build their interest in the manufacturing sector. The National Association of Manufacturers also provides a wide range of programs and tools for brand owners and initiatives such as Dream It, Do It provide programs for middle and high schools to enhance their Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education curriculums.

### It's a marathon, not a sprint

U.S. manufacturers can look abroad for inspiration when trying to solve the challenge of attracting and developing talent within the industry. A frequently-cited model is Germany's robust apprenticeship program, which trains students from a young age on the skills required for highly technical manufacturing professions. However, there are challenges to adapting these practices to the U.S. Differences in the demographics, economies and cultures of these two nations make an exact replication improbable — but that doesn't mean food and beverage processors should disengage.

If anything, manufacturers must remain persistent in their efforts to attract talent by utilizing the tools available and driving the creation of even more programs and partnerships that connect the industry with academia and eliminate the misconceptions surrounding careers in this sector. And it starts at home. As more

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food and beverage processors strengthen their roles within communities and relationships with local schools through effective programs, their efforts will steadily turn around negative perceptions and build tomorrow's workforce. These efforts will take investment, patience — and most importantly — action.

*For more information about PMMI's educational programs, visit [www.pmmi.org](http://www.pmmi.org) [2]; to learn about and register for PACK EXPO Las Vegas 2013, visit [www.packexpo.com](http://www.packexpo.com) [1].*

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[1] <http://www.packexpo.com>

[2] <http://www.pmmi.org>