

Manufacturing Is Cool

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The other day, intending to visit IMPO's sister website www.Manufacturing.net, I inadvertently typed the word "manufacturing" into my Google search bar.

Before I had a chance to click on the link to the website I was actually going one of the search results a few spaces down caught my eye: "Manufacturing is Cool." Believe it or not, I don't spend my whole day Google-ing "manufacturing," so it was the first time I'd stumbled across this SME Education Foundation page. SME (Society of Manufacturing Engineers) is a leader in manufacturing workforce development issues, working with industry, academic, and government partners to support the current and future skilled workforce. www.ManufacturingisCool.com, it turns out, is one of these skill-development platforms designed to target future workers and clarify what makes our industry, well... "cool."

But when I got to the website and started poking around, I was a bit surprised at what I saw. The opening page is an introduction written on cartoon loose leaf paper in what looks like a fourth or fifth grader's handwriting. The homepage behind it features a tool bar over an array of toys — robots, a compass — snacks, a calculator, and an iPod. With all the talk out there about companies working with high schools, technical colleges, and universities to advance the prospects of design and manufacturing as a career, the presentation seemed a little young. I have a few high school aged cousins and they're pretty well past their robot-playing days. In fact, now I do more monitoring of their Facebook pages than their fruit snack intake.

But as I dug deeper into the site, I started to realize that "Manufacturing is Cool" knew exactly what it was doing. The site offers a two-pronged approach where part targets the kid in the equation, and the other targets their parents. As I read further, it dawned on me that SME was filling in some gaps when it came to educating the future workforce. The site targets a younger audience than most development programs, offering scholarships to "Gateway Academy," a summer camp that focuses on technical skill development. And when they're still pre-high school, the role their parents play is even more critical in shaping their skills, interests, and goals. This is where Manufacturing Is Cool takes advantage of a unique opportunity with a demographic that we sometimes forget is also our future workforce.

We hear all the time how today's young adults are so disenfranchised with the idea of working in manufacturing that there are still thousands of jobs going unfilled. Typically, these positions require training in high precision skills like CNC programming and other advanced manufacturing techniques. But the skill mismatch we currently face shares a seat with a vast pool of candidates who spent the past few years educating themselves for other career paths.

Many say it's because manufacturing isn't "sexy." Perhaps this thinking is so

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ingrained in our culture that a strategy targeting college students is, for some, just too late. I'm not suggesting this is true for everyone, or that these post-secondary programs aren't fantastically effective in many ways, but the SME Education Foundation raises a good point with its website: Is it ever wasted effort to start influencing the opinions of these kids before they're ready to graduate? Can we ever be too prepared?

While I'm not advocating you immediately hand your newborn a graphing calculator or a TIG welder, it wouldn't hurt to emphasize the technical part of their education, even when you think they may be too young. While shop class may be a bit advanced for a 10-year-old, building model airplanes or investing in a chemistry set might start the wheels turning in the direction towards an eventual career working with their hands.

By high school and college age, the risk is having to fight an uphill battle—unraveling years of preconceptions about the industry, or enlightening parents who have already made up their minds about which path is best for their child's ultimate success. I think our efforts are required here, of course, but it's great to see the SME Education Foundation get at those kids who don't have a driver's license yet. The world is pretty wide open at that time and it's good to remind kids that there are many different roads that can lead to success.

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