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(A Lot Of) Help Wanted

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Factory Jobs Increasingly High-Tech, And Increasingly Hard To Fill



BOGDAN GLOGOWSKI, right, an instructor at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, helps student Emmanuel Ochieke set up a metal-enchaving program. (STEPHEN DUNN / January 30, 2008)

Connecticut's smaller makers of aerospace parts think their industry might have an image problem — invisibility. This poses a serious problem for the companies that are trying to attract new workers, young ones in particular, who appear to know little or nothing about manufacturing, executives say. So when the Aerospace Components Manufacturers, an industry group, convenes its annual trade show in Windsor next month, planners are hoping for a whole new crowd to show up — high school administrators, teachers, guidance counselors and parents.

"This is an opportunity for the system to understand what manufacturing is all about," said Allen Samuel, executive director of the manufacturers' association, which represents about 50 small aerospace parts makers in the state.

Company executives have already begun fanning out to high schools, technical schools and community colleges to introduce themselves, shed light on what their companies do — and explain that they've got paying jobs to offer.

"I would say it hit me mid-2007," said Michael Polo, president of AdChem Manufacturing Technologies, a 50-employee jet engine parts maker in Manchester. "That's when we really started getting much busier and realizing if we don't get more technical people, we're going to have to turn away business."

For all the attention paid to the overseas migration of U.S. manufacturing jobs — a clear and dramatic trend for decades already — local manufacturers say they have jobs to fill and often struggle to do it, especially in aerospace.

"For the last five years, I've been looking for 20 people [each year]," said John Kornegay, president of Kematics Corp., a bearings maker in Bloomfield that is a unit of Kaman Corp. "We're constantly hiring. We've been behind the hiring curve for five years, because you need the right people."

Figures for the total number of available manufacturing jobs are hard to come by. Samuel said that the manufacturers' association has not conducted a survey. But Frank Gulluni, who directs the manufacturing technology program at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, estimates that there might be as many as 900.

In all, Connecticut had 190,600 manufacturing jobs at the end of 2007, according to the state Department of Labor, down about 1 percent from a year earlier.

Whatever the number of unfilled jobs, executives bemoan the difficulty they face in filling them. In a state thick with aerospace companies that remain busy five years into an industrywide boom, he said, this means that some companies are turning away work.

"Whenever we have a meeting, the issue comes up of, 'We don't have enough workers, we don't have enough skilled workers,'" Samuel said.

Companies are worried not only about their current vacancies. Many operate with workforces made up largely of baby boomers, and executives are nervous that the day will soon arrive when they've got ample work but no one trained to do it.

Manufacturers offer several theories to explain the lackluster interest in factory careers, including a culture that emphasizes college, an outdated perception of manufacturing as dirty and dangerous, and a belief that there are no more factory jobs in the United States.

"I think a lot of the pressure is coming from parents," said Paul Murphy, president of Sterling Machine in Enfield, which employs about 80 people. "They want kids to go to a four-year school and become a doctor or a lawyer."

Executives aren't trying to divert anyone from college, but to make sure that people who don't go, or who don't go directly out of high school, realize that there are local opportunities in manufacturing, most of which pay better than unskilled service jobs.

Murphy said that the average wage for machinists at Sterling is \$21.57 an hour, and most of them work 55 hours a week.

Other people emphasize that manufacturing and post-secondary education are not incompatible and that the computerization of production has made advanced training more important. Some factory jobs require a firm grasp of geometry and trigonometry. And as products become more complex, so does reading blueprints.

"All the jobs presently and in the future are going to require post-secondary education," said Gulluni of Asnuntuck Community College.

The school's Manufacturing Technology Center offers training in such subjects as computer-operated machine tools and advanced blueprint reading.

Employers recently began sponsoring \$4,000 scholarships for students who attend school part time and work part time. This year 12 employers provided 27 scholarships, Gulluni said. He hopes to expand the offerings to at least 45 scholarships in the year ahead.

Kematics is sponsoring four students now, but it has many more job openings, between 20 and 25. The company needs workers for assembling, packaging and inspecting products, operating computer-controlled metal cutters, maintaining sophisticated machines and moving raw materials within the plant, among other tasks. Entry-level jobs typically pay \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year, he said. Over time, hourly workers could earn \$60,000 to \$70,000.

"These are not minimum-wage jobs," Kornegay said.

Nonetheless, he said, companies are not likely to institute dramatic wage increases as a way of filling job vacancies.

"You have to remember that we are not competing with companies in Connecticut," he said. "We are competing with companies around the world. And if we can't supply product at a competitive price, we don't have the jobs."

Amy Martin, director of guidance at Granby Memorial High School, said that few students there consider manufacturing careers and attributed this to a general lack of awareness about the nature of the work and the opportunities available.

"That's the big problem; it's the exposure," she said. "The kids are not educated about what it is."

But Granby has been building a relationship with Asnuntuck and this month will hold its first technical college and trade fair. There, students will get direct access to community college and trade school programs for manufacturing, hair dressing and culinary arts, for example.

Industry and its supporters hope that the adults in the school system will learn, too.

"What you don't understand and don't know about," Gulluni said, "you're not going to promote."

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