

Building the manufacturing workforce

Thanks to funding and coordination by Workforce Alliance, CT Works and the Manufacturer's Association, existing factory workers are improving their skills, and helping their companies remain competitive. When a punch-press operator for a manufacturer of modular data centers, took a class in blueprint reading from company engineers in a conference room above the production floor, he became one of thousands of workers creating their own opportunity.

These new skills qualified him to become a junior mechanic. He now operates a machine that cuts metal pieces into usable sizes. In six years he could become a senior mechanic and double his salary, if he takes more classes.

There is no denying a current and future shortage of skilled workers. Employers are expanding on-site training programs to focus on workers, rather than managers or supervisors; prodding high schools and colleges into modernizing math and science curriculums; and getting factories included in high school internship programs. Today's workers need to operate automated equipment and handle multiple jobs.

Adequate workforce preparation is a national problem. Locally, Workforce Alliance offers several ways for existing workers to gain training. In addition, on-the-job training incentives that pay up to half a worker's salary during training are immediately available.

A huge number of potential retirements will begin in earnest at the end of this decade, which could drain U.S. factories of some three million experienced workers. Meanwhile, manufacturers are still creating new jobs, in addition to re-filling the jobs of retirees. Small and midsize manufacturers are also investing in automated equipment which requires more and more skills to operate. According to a number of industry sources, 80 percent of manufacturers said they could not find the skilled workers they needed.

Manufacturing needs a new type of worker, people who understand computers. Manufacturers know this, and increasingly focus their efforts on partnerships with community colleges. The broad array of modern manufacturing skills is often called mechatronics. The term means integrating basic mechanical systems skills and expertise in electronic technologies with fields like pneumatics, hydraulics and electrical systems.

Workforce Alliance, in partnership with community colleges and trade associations, gets local manufacturers involved in curriculum development. Usually, the effort is to train factory workers broadly so they are familiar with all kinds of fabrication processes and machines.

For information on training programs and incentives, please contact your Chamber Workforce Specialist:

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