

News

Jobs go wanting as pipeline goes unfilled

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William Theodoropoulos operates a molding machine at United Lens Co of Southbridge.

SOUTHBRIDGE — Six men seated at tables in a yellow classroom hunch silently over sheets of paper, scratching out answers to a pop quiz covering the basics of reading, English and math.

At the front of the room, part of the Workforce Central Career Center, Leslie Parady waits.

A project manager with the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership of Worcester, she's looking for as many prospective applicants as possible for 12 slots in a free two-week training course aimed at getting people ready for entry-level jobs in manufacturing.

"We want to make sure they have the right attitude and the right skills to have a good success rate," Ms. Parady had said before the class.

Just a few weeks before this June session, she'd held a similar recruitment session. Only two people showed up.

Recruiting falls

One by one, the men put down their pencils, turn in their papers and leave. They've already watched a video by Jeremy Bout, a Canadian producer whose Edge Factor business promotes manufacturing. They've also listened to Ms. Parady describe the course and shared a little about themselves. Some are making ends meet by working part-time jobs. One man seems distracted, and Ms. Parady later said he smelled of alcohol.

On the way out the door, some of the men sound enthusiastic.

"I hope I like it," said John J. Allen of Dudley. "This is an opportunity."

Yet one month later when the two-week course wraps up, not one of the men will be among the graduates.

Only seven of 31 people offered spots in the course will make it to the end.

It's not quite the outcome organizers hoped for when they poured about \$12,000 in state grant money into the effort, placed advertisements on Facebook and asked area manufacturers to display posters promoting the course.

"I do see this as a success," said Alexandra McNitt, executive director of the Central Massachusetts South Chamber of Commerce, which coordinated the program with other organizations. "It's just, for the degree of effort, it shouldn't be so hard."

Help wanted in Worcester area

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates about 301,000 manufacturing jobs were open during May, and Central Massachusetts employers say some of those openings are in their plants.

It's a strange phenomenon. Worcester County manufacturing employment in December was down by about 8,000 jobs since the Great Recession started in 2007. Even after the recession ended in 2009, job losses continued. More than 100 manufacturing businesses in Worcester County evaporated between 2007 and 2013.

Yet when the Brookings Institution analyzed help-wanted advertisements from companies in the Worcester metropolitan area during the first three months of 2013, it found 215 ads for production jobs. The ads stayed active, and the jobs likely unfilled, for an average 21 days.

Some employers say they struggle to attract people even for jobs that require no education past high school. James H. Waddick, vice president of United Lens Co. Inc. of Southbridge, a custom maker of specialty optical parts, fiber optics, seeks employees through schools, employment centers, employment agencies and the company's own workers. The requirements? Basic math and a good attitude.

"Be here. Be here everyday," Mr. Waddick said. "If you can do the basics, we'll teach you the rest."

An image problem

Observers and even people within manufacturing say the industry has an image problem that makes it tough to recruit workers.

"Manufacturing doesn't have a terribly good reputation in some respects, partly because people have an old-fashioned image of what it's like, partly because people know that jobs have been lost in that sector," said Andre Mayer, senior adviser to the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, an employers' group. "It's got some negatives to overcome."

Throughout U.S. history, workers often landed jobs in manufacturing by knowing someone in the field, according to Mr. Mayer. But as the field has dwindled, fewer people know others in manufacturing, he said. In addition, starting pay levels for entry-level jobs may not inspire confidence.

Prospects and pay

"I think that there may well be a problem of people not understanding that you can get relatively quickly to a good level of pay, even if you start at a lower pay level," Mr. Mayer said.

The average yearly earnings of Worcester County workers in manufacturing during the final three months of 2013 was \$73,520, well above the county's average annual salary of \$49,739, BLS data show.

In Southbridge, the people who made it through — or rejected — training for entry-level manufacturing jobs described varied reasons for their decisions.

Mr. Allen, 51, of Dudley, said he decided to not go through the program partly out of concern about taking two weeks away from his part-time jobs without assurances of a job prospect at the end of the training.

"They weren't offering me anything," he said.

Jessica L. Rufo of Charlton had worked in customer-service jobs for years before a friend sent her an electronic link to a Facebook ad for the course. They completed the course together, learning math for manufacturing shop floors, blueprint reading and measurement tools.

"I needed to look for a job. That's part of it," said Ms. Rufo, 36. "I figured I could get a little bit of knowledge. It seemed interesting."

Within one week of completing the course, she had a phone interview and an in-person interview for jobs. George F. Caldwell, 23, a grounds-keeper living in North Brookfield, also landed two interviews within a week of completing the course.

"If there's a free course to go to, and you have the opportunity, why not?" Mr. Caldwell said. "I went in there with open eyes to see if I liked it, and I enjoyed every bit."

Efficiency needed

Mr. Waddick of United Lens was among those interested in people who completed the course. By the middle of last week, he had already offered jobs to two people:

One to train to slice optical materials into thin disks, and one to grind and polish flat precision optics.

"I called Monday, yesterday, and made appointments for them to come in today," he said. "They spent anywhere from an hour to two hours here, and they're going to start on Monday."

What employers and industry officials really want is a more efficient way to build up a pipeline of future workers.

Nationally, manufacturing organizations are looking to former members of the military, the unemployed, career changers and women as potential recruits.

They're also looking to influence youths and their parents, partly because manufacturing has an age problem.

The median age of U.S. manufacturing workers was 40.5 in 2000, according to the Manufacturing Institute, the education and recruitment arm of the National Association of Manufacturers. By 2012, the median age was up to 44.7.

"In the long run, we're going to be needing younger folks to take this route and get into manufacturing," said Kathleen Joy, operations manager for the Southbridge office of Workforce Central, the state's career centers. "That's why we need to approach them earlier, maybe in junior high."

Build what they love

One effort to do that springs from the Manufacturing Institute, which launched a campaign called "Dream It, Do It," about 10 years ago to tell children in Grades 6 through 12 and their parents about careers in manufacturing.

The campaign now works with organizations at 31 sites across the country, and in 2013 it involved 250,000 students in activities such as plant tours or camps, said program manager Nicholas D'Antonio.

It also reached more than 70,000 parents and teachers.

The campaign has found young people especially respond to manufacturing when it comes to cherished objects, whether it's a guitar or a motorcycle, according to Mr. D'Antonio.



What resonates, he said, is "the idea that they can be part of making the things they love most."