

Skills for the 21st-Century Workplace

Technical skills are not enough to ensure success in the modern manufacturing workplace, a fast-paced environment where advanced technology is integrated with interpersonal connections.

PLANNING FOR THE WORKFORCE of the future requires coming to grips with two major concerns. The first is the skilled-talent gap and how to close it. The second concern involves identifying the core competencies that will be most needed to augment these skills and finding ways they can best be developed.

Let's look at the skills gap first. Two studies co-sponsored by the Manufacturing Institute—the Accenture “2014 Manufacturing Skills and Training Study” and Deloitte’s, “The Skills Gap in U.S. Manufacturing” (both available at www.themanufacturinginstitute.org)— provide extensive data and insights regarding the situation.

According to these reports, the skills gap is severe. Of the manufacturers surveyed, 67% currently have an overall shortage of qualified workers and 56% expect this shortage to worsen over the next three to five years. The shortage is even greater in skilled production positions, such as machinists, operators, craft workers, technicians and industrial engineers. For these positions, 83% of manufacturers reported current shortages, with 69% expecting the shortage to get worse over the next three to five years. These skill shortages have impacted the ability of 77% of surveyed manufacturers to maintain production levels consistent with customer demand and, for 72% of respondents, have dampened new product development and innovation.

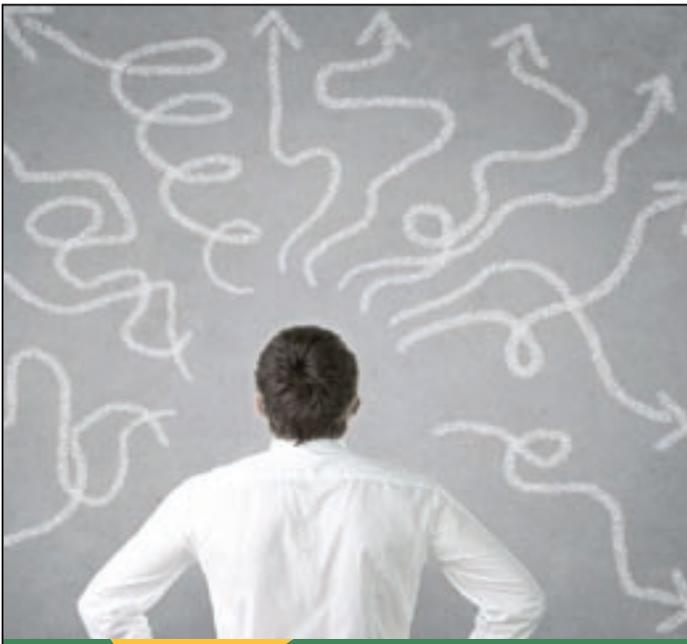
Manufacturers are using multiple strategies to overcome the skills gap. The most common involve providing internal training and development programs, ranging from informal job shadowing to structured apprenticeships. In some cases, the training employs digital learning from sources such as Tooling U and American Welding Online. Additionally,



Photo by David Bohrer/INAM

formal training from community colleges, trade schools and certificate programs are often combined with internal training. Not coincidentally, Dutchess Community College graduated the first cohort of students from its Certified Production Technician program in August and will be starting a new cohort this month.

Other strategies include the use of overtime and of staffing agencies; enticing older workers to stay employed by scaling back hours; using knowledge-management solutions to capture critical information and



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expanding the candidate pool to include trainable candidates with more general skills.

There are several root causes of the skills gap. One of the most significant is the outdated and incorrect public perception of the manufacturing sector. In a recent study by Deloitte Consulting, 80% of public respondents said that manufacturing jobs are the first to be offshored and only 43% believed that manufacturing jobs are as secure as jobs in other sectors.

Manufacturers can't solve the problem on their own. In order to clarify public perception, government agencies and educational institutions need to provide young people and their parents with positive messages regarding manufacturing. These messages might include such facts as: manufacturing employees' average compensation is 19% higher than that of workers in nonmanufacturing industries; 82% of US manufacturers plan to increase production in the next five years; and the fact that, since 2006, hours worked per week in manufacturing has increased while the economy as a whole has seen a decrease. Promoting these realities could serve as a starting point for creating more demand for manufacturing training and education.

Skills Plus Competencies

Having technical skills, however, is not enough to ensure success in the 21st century manufacturing workplace, a fast-paced environment where advanced technology is integrated with interpersonal connections. Workers also need a set of core competencies, including proficiency in information-processing skills such as literacy, numeracy and, importantly, the ability to do problem-solving in technology-rich environments. These abilities have become crucial, mandated by the ubiquitous use of computers and dependence on information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the supply and utilization of services.

Finally, aside from having technical training and being adept at problem-solving and information-processing, the 21st-century worker must possess the basic employability skills of interpersonal communication, self-management and the ability to learn. Employers want workers with "evergreen" job skills that will continue to be useful in changing times.

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Skills for career growth

If you want to find a job that will let you grow professionally, you'll want to make sure that you have skills that will help your company grow right along with you. These skills will make you a highly sought-after candidate in any field, and will help you to keep the job you get:

1. **Research skills:** Nobody has all the information they'll ever need already in her head (or on her desk), but if you know how to do research, you'll always be able to find the information in a timely manner.
2. **Logic and reason:** Every company runs into problems, and those problems need to be solved. A firm grasp of logic and reason will make you an invaluable asset.
3. **Technological literacy:** Computers have taken over the workplace and every worker needs to have at least a basic level of skill and comfort with modern technology, just to be able to function.
4. **Communication skills:** Every job will require you to communicate with other people, in speech and often in writing, as well. Employers are interested in workers who can express themselves clearly when dealing with supervisors, underlings and co-workers.
5. **Organization:** A messy desk may be acceptable (though it is never recommended), but a messy approach to your work is never something an employer is looking for. You'll probably have to do a lot of different tasks, each with a different schedule and deadline, and being able to organize your work is crucial.
6. **Interpersonal skills:** Every workplace has people in it, and those people are likely to have different personalities and temperaments. Being able to work well with others and communicate across barriers of culture and personality is a necessity.
7. **Career-minded orientation:** If you don't know where you're headed, neither does your company. Having a plan for your own career will make your employers more willing to help you achieve your goals since they will benefit from your growth.

These skills aren't the only ones that you'll need for your specific job, but they are skills that will make you an asset to any employer and serve you well in any position that you may find yourself in.

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