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Washington County
Manufacturer's Association

Jennifer Stockdale is the Senior Director of Communications and Community Engagement for GBU Life in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Jennifer is a long-standing board member of the Washington County Manufacturer's Association (WCMA). WCMA seeks to enhance the industrial climate of Washington County Pennsylvania and its adjoining areas and advance the professional knowledge of its members.

Not Your Grandfather's Manufacturing Workforce: The Challenges of Attracting New Generations to Manufacturing Jobs

During a monthly board meeting for the Washington County Manufacturer's Association (WCMA), members of our board, made up of company leaders and manufacturing advocates in Washington County, Pennsylvania, were discussing how it used to be an honor and privilege to work in manufacturing. These jobs were hard to get, and the men and women lucky enough to have them could feel secure in earning a comfortable wage for supporting their families. I, too, recall my mother talking fondly about working for Brockway Glass, a key employer in Washington, Pennsylvania, until it closed in the late 1980s. Although the working conditions were difficult at times, she still opted to work there because she was young and "you couldn't beat the pay."

Since I joined the WCMA board 20 years ago, the conversation around manufacturing jobs has continuously shifted. Manufacturers are unable to find enough people willing to fill the jobs that they have available. According



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Society and parents nudging graduating high school students to pursue higher education and compete for large-scale, entry-level employers such as Amazon means that there are fewer students considering or willing to pursue entry-level manufacturing jobs, even though they may be attractive alternatives. I asked a fellow board member – Robert Julius, HR Manager at Perryman Company, a leading provider of titanium products and services – if he would advise his own children to explore a career in manufacturing. He replied, "Yes, I would advise my children to go into the same industry." Learning how machines operate and how to keep them moving is what keeps the world running. Without operators and technicians learning the equipment and maintaining it, we would not have most consumer items in our homes, offices, or cars. These jobs are generally

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to a 2021 study published by Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute, as many as 2.1 million manufacturing jobs will be unfilled through 2030. This could negatively impact manufacturing revenue and production and even cost the U.S. economy as much as \$1 trillion.

very stable and secure. You will have to work to earn your pay, but the work is highly rewarding.

Several nonprofit organizations in Washington County and throughout the region are focused on encouraging high school students to consider careers in manufacturing. One such



organization is The Challenge Program, Inc., which matches up schools with local business partners. The business partners provide career information specific to their company and encourage hard work by awarding students with monetary prizes every school year. Another program is the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development's Manufacturing Training-to-Career Program, which aims to spread awareness about the stability and solid earning potential of manufacturing jobs. Many of these jobs offer on-the-job training so that people can quickly get into the workforce and grow their careers or support their families.

Another issue that manufacturers are seeing is a lack of basic skills from new applicants. "With any job, attendance and punctuality are essential," said Julius. He added, "Beyond showing up, basic math skills and simple mechanics are important in our industry. Even just reading a book or two on simple machines will introduce students to more concepts in industry than they are being offered in school."

"One thing we discovered from a recent symposium we held," said Larry Butka, President of the WCMA, "is that we need to reach out to students earlier so that they can start thinking about a career path in manufacturing. We also need to toot our own horns and show off the good company cultures we have built. I've seen companies having career signing days so parents can show off the fact that their son or daughter has joined a great manufacturing company – just as if you were getting a scholarship to play football. It is important for companies to use tools like social media and find ways to make these jobs attractive to students."

Manufacturing jobs are not so much the dirty and dangerous jobs of yesterday. Now more than ever, machine operators are relying more on computer and programming skills. Facilities

are investing in more modern, clean, and green operations. Chris Stockdale, Document Controller for Hatch, a Pittsburgh engineering consulting firm, said he has seen a swing in projects from just repair and replacement of old infrastructure to now many more projects dealing with new manufacturing builds that will rely on green technology. Furthermore, in response to the world's need to conserve resources, companies are focusing on adopting sustainable business practices. This is definitely a trend that can help with career choices, as the upcoming Gen Z workforce is marked by its concern for the environment and commitment toward more sustainable practices. "My facilities are state-of-the-art," said Julius, "they are very well-lit, clean, and well-ventilated – nothing like you've seen in history books or on TV. We are consistently investing in safer, more efficient equipment and work hard to engineer out hazards. It is a very safe and clean place to work."

So, how can we do a better job uniting those coming into the workforce with manufacturing companies who need a strong workforce?

Larry Butka said, "I would encourage students to develop a trade that can be used in multiple functions; for example, learning electrical or HVAC. This opens up doors in multiple industries and ensures the student always has a way to make income, even if they are working for individuals on the side. We, as manufacturers, need to keep the workforce engaged. The new workforce responds well to continuous assessment and encouragement. Great salaries and raises are nice, and our sector generally pays well, but the occasional free lunch, swag, and other fun awards also help to keep young workers engaged. A clear growth path can also help. A plan for how they can move from laborer to skilled workers to management is also great for keeping entry-level employees motivated and with your company long-term." 