

Mohawk Valley Manufacturers Need the Community's Help with This Workforce Solution

By Everton H. Henriques and Cory Albrecht

Manufacturers in the Mohawk Valley need more skilled workers. They need people to fill jobs that are available today and those that will be open in the years to come.

That's what we heard in March when we held our Workforce Solutions Forum in Utica. It gathered dozens of industry professionals who are looking for solutions to the workforce challenges their businesses face.

It's an issue that is affecting manufacturing companies across the country. About 80 percent of manufacturers are dealing with a shortage of qualified applicants for skilled production positions, according to the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). Additionally, over the next decade, about 2 million jobs nationwide are expected to go unfilled due to a lack of certain skills among the workforce.

This growing challenge requires multi-faceted, regional solutions and even greater involvement from the community. On factory floors, inside classrooms, in the halls of government and at kitchen tables in our own homes, solving this challenge will require sustained collective action.

Fortunately, several partners at the local, state and national levels are already actively working together to strengthen the region's workforce.

For example, [Mohawk Valley Community College](#) is playing a key role in convening the right people, organizations and companies to develop and promote solutions, such as the MVCC FABLab, the SUNY Apprenticeship Program, technical training programs for employers and technology-based certificate programs. MVCC also has a dedicated workforce development team that consists of more than 20 employees. Additionally, our organizations, FuzeHub and the Advanced Institute for Manufacturing, are working directly with manufacturers to solve workforce issues through the [New York Manufacturing Extension Partnership](#) (NY MEP).

However, at our Utica forum, manufacturers told us the big solution they need now is to shift perceptions.

The modern factory floor is much different than the factories of the old days. It's not a grimy, dirty place that only offers monotonous work, rather it's a tech-driven setting where workers are challenged to uncover and execute solutions quickly and confidently.

Manufacturing jobs today require a blend of technology and critical thinking skills. What many don't require is a four-year college degree.

With career and technical education, or CTE, students can fast-track their careers and enter in-demand fields. This pathway to good-paying jobs comes without the heavy student debt burden that typically accompanies bachelor's degrees.

There's often talk about manufacturing jobs as "middle skills" positions—but in saying that, it implies that there's always something better that people in the manufacturing industry should do with their lives. The reality is manufacturers make and create and innovate. They build things that people depend on and products that improve quality of life for everyone.

Now, to actually shift perceptions around manufacturing, we need conversations to happen outside of manufacturing forums and government offices and even beyond the pages of this newspaper. We need parents, educators and manufacturing professionals to connect with young people about the importance of studying STEM fields and the purpose—and paycheck—people can find in production jobs.

Let's keep this end goal in mind: If we successfully build a workforce that is prepared for the jobs of today and tomorrow, we will create a competitive advantage for the Mohawk Valley that will help existing manufacturers grow and encourage new companies to locate or expand here. It will help ignite growth and prosperity that benefits the entire community.

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