

Technical Education: Another Pathway to Success

By

Erick Ajax

May , 2007

As the owner of a manufacturing company with 50 employees in Fridley, **I have never found it so difficult to find skilled workers.** As the baby boom generation retires and our workplace becomes increasingly high-tech, the pipeline of future talent is drying up before my eyes.

I see some disturbing trends. Less than 60 percent of our students in the Minneapolis and St. Paul public high schools graduate in four years. Only 24 percent enroll in public higher education within two years of graduating.

Most college freshmen probably would be surprised to learn that only about one half of college students graduate in four to six years. The other half drop out for various reasons. So the odds are that one in two college students who just started attending a four-year college this fall might be headed in the wrong direction.

- Not every rewarding career requires a four-year college degree.
- Many high school students would be well-served to consider a two-year technical or community college as a first step on their career ladder.

Someone with a degree from a local community college has a broad range of high-paying and challenging jobs awaiting them in modern manufacturing. A quick Internet search on “manufacturing careers” will confirm there are plenty of opportunities for students with a two-year associate’s degree – and that a high school diploma alone just isn’t enough in today’s high-tech workplace.

It may seem counterintuitive that after several high profile plant closing and manufacturing layoff announcements across the state, most Minnesota manufacturers join me in having a tough time finding high skilled workers. These are challenging jobs with high wages and good benefits. Front-line positions require advanced technical skills beyond those taught in high school, along with the ability to interact with computer systems, work in a team and solve problems.

Make no mistake about it, manufacturing remains a vibrant sector of the Minnesota economy – employing one in seven Minnesotans, more than 350,000 men and women earning an average annual wage of \$48,915 and good benefits like health care and disability insurance plus 401(k) retirement accounts.

Our inability to produce enough skilled manufacturing workers is in part a cultural and perception problem. Students don't think manufacturing has any appeal or a vibrant future. Young people – along with their parents and educators – have an outdated image of manufacturing today. They still think of manufacturing as it existed 50 years ago – repetitive, assembly-line work. Most people do not realize that cutting-edge technology has transformed manufacturing in ways that are hard to imagine if you haven't visited a factory lately.

Fortunately, Minnesota has some of the best community and technical colleges in the world. Two new centers of excellence in manufacturing and engineering in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system are enhancing opportunities for students at the two-year colleges and are working closely with high schools.

It's important for parents and students to know that Minnesota's excellent community and technical colleges are often the best pathway to a rewarding, high-skill job or ongoing educational opportunities.

Erick Ajax is the Vice President and owner of E.J. Ajax and Sons Inc., in Fridley, Minnesota.