

StarTribune.com



Investing in their futures



Glen Stubbe, Star Tribune

Newly minted metalworking journeyman Mong Vang assembled sheet metal boxes at Ajax. The company invested \$50,000 in tuition and programs.

Despite a recession, layoffs and a 33% revenue drop, E.J. Ajax & Sons provided advanced training for remaining employees.

By **DEE DePASS**, Star Tribune

Last update: February 9, 2010 - 8:19 PM

A funky beat worthy of Prince escaped from E.J. Ajax's metal-stamping plant last Monday as three apprentices transformed steel slabs

for industrial uses.


Denise "Neciy" Wilson pounded holes in locker-latches on a two-story press while Mong Vang shaped flat steel into fire extinguisher boxes. A third apprentice banged out parts for a giant heating system.

Despite the deafening clatter, some visitors to the Fridley plant began to dance, and the dancing fit the celebratory mood. After all, the employees, company founders and officials from the state, Hennepin Technical College (HTC) and the office of U.S. Sen. Al Franken were at the factory that day to celebrate the graduation of the three apprentices and the survival of the once-threatened manufacturer.

While Ajax and other manufacturers, as a group, have let go thousands of workers over the past few years, Ajax also invested \$50,000 in tuition and training programs that improved the skills of its remaining workers, despite enduring a 33 percent plunge in company revenue over the past 19 months.

After 480 hours of night classes, Wilson, Vang and apprentice Chris Allen received diplomas signifying they'd crossed over from apprentice to "journeyman" -- one of the highest skill designations in the

Advertisement



THE ALUMINUM SHOW
 FRIDAY, MARCH 5 - SUNDAY, MARCH 7
 ON SALE NOW TICKETMASTER.COM

MYSTIC LAKE
 CASINO • HOTEL
mysticlake.com

Owned and Operated by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

Print Powered By FormatDynamics

StarTribune.com



metalworking industry. They followed 21 co-workers who previously took the same path. The curriculum was approved by the state Department of Labor and Industry and carried out by Hennepin Technical College and the managers at Ajax.

"You are now at the top of the food chain," co-owner Erick Ajax teased Wilson as he introduced her to HTC's training director, Joe Fredkove, HTC President Cecillia Cervantes and Steve Sviggum, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry.

Wilson turned apple red and dabbed her eyes as an emissary read a letter from Franken congratulating her. Vang bounded up to the podium to shake hands and pose for pictures.

"I love to learn everything," said Wilson, who came to Ajax five years ago as a temp knowing little about metalwork. Today, she makes about \$17 an hour.

The apprenticeship program "makes us unique," said Vang, whose parents migrated to Minnesota decades ago after spending time in a Laotian refugee camp.

Ajax, who was there with his parents and

uncle, who headed the company for decades, looked on with pride. The buoyant mood belied a year of pain.

"Yes, 2009 was a tough year in the manufacturing sector," Ajax said. The 65-year-old family firm laid off 20 of about 54 workers and slashed salaries 15 to 20 percent. Still, it invested in its remaining workers.

Fredkove sees no contradiction between a company making layoffs and investing in employee education. "If you look at any of those people inside Ajax, you see they have maintained their jobs because they have maintained their stackable credentials. And that is through job training, industry training and apprenticeships. It's all tied [together].

Dedicated training efforts by manufacturers are showing up in force at technical colleges across the state. Manufacturers such as the hydraulics and electrical firm Eaton Corp., lawn equipment maker Toro Co., South St. Paul Steel Supply Co. and others create customized in-house training programs with the help of MnSCU instructors or usher workers into Dunwoody Institute, Hennepin Technical College and other trade schools that teach manufacturing skills.

Advertisement

PENNIES PAY BIG
THE MOST PENNY SLOTS!

Mystic LAKE
CASINO • HOTEL
mysticlake.com

Owned and Operated by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

Print Powered By FormatDynamics

StarTribune.com



"Even though manufacturing employment has dropped dramatically over the last five years the percent of technical and manufacturing education actually increased," said Mary Rothchild, director of business and industry relations at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU). "Over the last four years, enrollment in manufacturing programs grew by over 44 percent." At the same time, the number of sector jobs dropped by 51,200 in the state, she said.

According to the National Association of Manufacturers, U.S. manufacturers have learned to compete with low-cost producers abroad by investing in highly specialized tools, dies and robotic machines that make specialized parts with tight tolerances. As a result, plant managers need highly skilled workers to operate them.

Bob Kill, CEO of Enterprise Minnesota, which works with small manufacturers around the state, said other factories are catching on that continued training, even in rocky times, is a necessity.

A recent Minnesota Enterprise survey of 500 manufacturers found that those firms successfully emerging from the recession have "figured out a balance between the number of workers they had to cut and how

they would continue to invest in the workforce," Kill said. "There is no question. I think there is more [employee] skill upgrading going on in plants than most manufacturers like to talk about.

"Erick [Ajax] has a really good relationship with the technical colleges and that is unique. To keep investing like he did really [deserves] a pat on the back," Kill said.

"The program between Hennepin Technical College and Ajax & Sons is a fairly unique program," Rothchild agreed. "Most of our apprenticeship programs are done in the construction trades."

The investment appears to be paying off.

"The good news is that while we lost money in January and February, we finished 2009 in the black, without any damage to our balance sheet. And we have begun to recall some of our laid-off workers," Ajax said. "We are cautiously optimistic that our business will continue to grow."

Dee DePass • 612-673-7725

Advertisement

PENNIES PAY BIG
THE MOST PENNY SLOTS!

Mystic LAKE
CASINO • HOTEL
mysticlake.com

Owned and Operated by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

TwinCities.com

Politicians we deserve

Pioneer Press

Updated: 01/30/2010 04:32:08 PM CST

Once again, Edward Lotterman has hit the nail on the head ("We're all to blame for economic mess," Jan. 28). We get the politicians we deserve.

Yes, we need politicians less concerned with re-election and more concerned with good public policy that produces long-term solutions, not just short-term fixes. But, more than that we need intelligent, informed voters who care as much about the future of their grandchildren as about lining up for short-term tax breaks or subsidies.

Our problems are not just economic; they are also ethical. When we live beyond our means, we hurt not only ourselves, but also our neighbors and future generations. It is embarrassing that a country so blessed with natural resources and freedom is frittering away its economic well being. We need to get real about economics, and it starts at home.

J. H. Fonkert, St. Paul

Fiscal adults

Edward Lotterman has not heard "one individual" identify specific areas to cut in the federal budget? He's running with the wrong crowd.

Try these: Eliminate the federal Department of Education. Reduce subsidies to federal employees' health and pension benefits by 20 percent to 50 percent. Eliminate agricultural subsidies. Eliminate the mortgage interest deduction (indirect subsidy to mortgage bankers and Realtors). End Social Security promises for those under age 50. Disband our

foreign military bases. Dissolve Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac; never sanction another government-sponsored enterprise. Reverse TARP as far as possible and abolish the stimulus provisions, preserving whatever funds are not yet spent.

Yes, a majority of citizens have desired their representatives to wave a magic wand, providing services and benefits without severe taxation or deficits and debt. But the commentary of those who do propose steep cuts is widely available in conservative publications.

If Lotterman is so tired of the fiscal babies, his columns would argue for cuts and lead the fiscal adults to a majority position. Perhaps his real purpose is to imply that cuts are impossible, so we'll have to settle for tax increases alone. In that case, he's not a fiscal adult any more than the "petulant toddlers" he finds so irritating.

A. E. King, Shoreview

Education, not subsidies

As the owner of a Minnesota manufacturing plant, I have to shake my head when our state and federal lawmakers suggest that wage and tax subsidies will actually help my company create new, long-term jobs that pay family-sustaining wages and benefits.

Subsidy programs assume that manufacturing companies can no longer hold their own against global competition through the American ideals of productivity and quality. The continuing success of many Minnesota companies, including mine, demonstrates the opposite.

While there are many different perspectives within the manufacturing sector, many of us agree on the

Advertisement

Help people in need.

Donate your car, boat or RV

Free Towing ■ Tax Deductible



FREE
3 day vacation to over
80 destinations.

Call Toll-Free
1-877-225-9384



Print Powered By 

Dynamics

TwinCities.com

following: The fate of our economy, the futures of our companies, the hopes of our children and the viability of the American Dream begin and end with education.

We are deeply concerned about the lack of workers with the skills that we need for continued growth. What we need most right now is government support of education to address both the unemployment problem and the skills shortage. With skilled employees who can work safely and productively, we will continue to hold our own and thrive in a global economy.

Erick Ajax, Brooklyn Park

Recycling the criticism

The Republican response to the president's State of the Union address was classic. It continued the same rhetoric of the past three decades: Government interference is destroying the economy and our society. We can't afford to fund public programs. We need to cut taxes, especially for the rich. Free markets need deregulation. Job growth only occurs through small businesses. Free enterprise will save us and solve all of our problems.

This was their remedy when we had a government surplus and economic growth at the beginning of the last decade. This is their remedy during one of the worst economic downturns in our nation's history. Republican philosophy is simple: No matter what society's problems, we have the answer: Repeat the first paragraph.

I believe in recycling, but this is a little silly.

J.R. Slama, Eagan

Fix problems. Stop the blame.

Politics as usual. President Obama goes to painstaking measures to explain that most of the problems that affect us are the result of the previous administration and then tries to cajole Republican members of Congress to work together and see it his way. As an unemployed person, I'm most irritated that a healthy majority of the lawmakers present —Democrats and Republicans — have been around for the last nine years, (eight Bush and one Obama) so everyone is responsible for the "state" we are in, and all of them should be embarrassed by the results of their so-called labor.

If things had gone well for the Bush presidency, there is a good chance Sen. John McCain would be president. So Obama needs to see the whole picture and do his best to fix all of the problems and stop this incessant blame game.

I want collaboration and solutions to complex problems, and credit be damned. They should act like a team and not a bunch of prima-donnas who think their "place" is a given.

Thomas Imhof, St. Paul

Advertisement

30-Year Fixed Rate \$200K loan for \$1,060/mo.



The Easiest Way to Get a Home Loan®

866-945-4410

*Rates can change. Act now!

Print Powered By

Dynamic S