Availability of qualified labor is increasingly seen as a major problem for both the construction industry and for manufacturers. In the former case, the National Association of Home Builders, nahb.org, reported in a 2017 Eye on Housing blog that the percentage of its surveyed builders who indicated that cost and availability of labor is their most significant problem skyrocketed from 13 percent of builders in 2011 to 82 percent in 2017.

Similarly, the Manufacturing Institute, themanufacturinginstitute.org, and Deloitte Consulting, deloitte.com, concluded in a 2015 report, “The Skills Gap in U.S. Manufacturing 2015 and Beyond,” that the manufacturing industry is projecting a shortfall of workers with critically needed technological or problem-solving skills. “Over the next decade, nearly 3.5 million manufacturing jobs likely need to be filled,” the study found, and further surmised that, “the skills gap is expected to result in 2 million of those jobs being unfulfilled.”

Forbes, forbes.com, reports that the causes are many, including too few graduates grounded in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines, and an under-appreciation of the favorable wages in U.S. manufacturing (averaging about $77,500 a year, according to the article).

Forbes also pointed out the reputation problems of manufacturing jobs. There is a widely held perception that manufacturing is outdated, dirty and dangerous legacy work that has little to interest today’s new breed of workers. (This is despite the reality that nearly all the “dirty” jobs in manufacturing have either been automated out of existence or moved offshore.)

Couple this with the fact that, as Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos put it at the Wall Street Journal CEO Council conference in Washington last November, “for decades now, we have given the subtle, or not so subtle, message that the only path for a successful life is a four-year degree.”

We have a serious challenge on our hands that threatens to sabotage the resurgence of American manufacturing.

To rise to this challenge, one logical step is to restart the vocational training programs that have largely been purged from our educational systems. We can do so by adopting a holistic combination of programs run or offered by manufacturers, and by high schools or colleges.

With four-year college tuition inflating rapidly, manufacturers have an opportunity to reach out to young people through these reborn programs to offer the possibilities of a career in manufacturing as a viable first step toward long-term professional success, not merely a way to obtain a job for the time being. We have an opportunity to dispel the “dirty job” reputation and to communicate that today’s manufacturing is replete with exciting, cutting-edge technologies—such as 3-D printing, CNC machines, robotics and software programming—to drive innovation.

The renaissance of apprenticeships

A multi-dimensional approach to recruiting, managing and developing talent is essential at the local level. One example is the program unfolding in my home state of Ohio, which has created a new campaign to promote manufacturing careers. “Making Ohio: Ohio Manufacturing” is an information portal about manufacturing jobs and the needed training, aimed at building a lasting workforce recruitment...
and skill development system in the state. Many other states are following suit.

A major element of this effort is shaping up to be a renewal of apprenticeship programs that were prevalent mid-century, but which had since been scaled back or eliminated. As youths realize that college isn’t necessarily right for them, financially or otherwise, earning a certification or completing an apprenticeship in a particular skill becomes an appealing career path. National Apprenticeship-Week, dol.gov/apprenticeship/NAW, held Nov. 13-20, 2017, was intended to expose the U.S. workforce to this fact and help enlist manufacturers to participate.

Via the White House Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion, DeVos is calling for the education community to quit pushing students to earn a four-year degree and instead renew a focus on apprenticeship programs. Earlier this year, President Trump signed an executive order that aims to expand apprenticeships and use available funding to improve job-training programs. Manufacturers willing to step up may want to consider becoming a part of the Department of Labor’s “ApprenticeshipUSA” Registered Apprenticeship program, which can be integrated into any manufacturer’s current training and human resource development strategy to help solve the skills-gap challenges.

According to the DOL, businesses that use apprenticeships reduce worker turnover by fostering greater employee loyalty, increasing productivity and improving the bottom line. In addition, apprenticeships offer workers a way to start new careers with good wages. For more information on Registered Apprenticeship, visit dol.gov/apprenticeship or contact the apprenticeship office in your state.

By whatever combination of means, manufacturers should build robust community outreach programs, design curriculums in collaboration with technical and community colleges, and strengthen their resolve to implement apprenticeships—all with the goal of attracting and focusing the latent talent pool we are confident exists.

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