

Machinists are a Dying Breed

An Analysis of the Skilled Labor Shortage in America Today

Written by: Jason Bee
Precision One Medical

When was the last time that you pondered the idea of extinction? Was it while watching a show about dinosaurs? Perhaps it was at the zoo while a keeper was discussing an endangered species like the Komodo dragon or the Giant Panda. Would you be surprised to learn that an extinction type scenario is unfolding a lot closer to home and even right under our noses? In fact, an entire American sub-culture is on the verge of becoming extinct. In the United States, The future of the skilled machinist is looking dim at best. The number of skilled machinists is declining at an alarming rate with no end in sight. If manufacturing companies in the United States intend to keep up with the demand of the high precision manufacturing industry, companies themselves must create and establish training programs and facilities. Author Mark Carter helps to argue this point in his article concerning the lack of skilled laborers by touching on the concerns of the lack of skill coming into the field. Although expensive and time consuming, it is a sure way to preserve the dignity and pride of the American skilled laborer and to ensure that there is a future for the trade. Also, between the lack of advertisement for said positions, as told by author Mike Cronin, premier shops only hiring skilled machinists, and only large, corporate shops offering entry-level positions but promoting laziness, lack of pride, and poor work habits, there is little to no incentive to explore and/or enter the field.

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An immediate roadblock abruptly halts those out there aspiring towards a career in the machining industry. Premier shops only want to hire machinists who are already highly skilled and large, corporately owned shops hire people for entry-level positions but promote a “renter” mentality. Most employees in almost every employment situation take on the attitude of either an “owner” or a “renter”. Owners can be described as people who take pride in their work. They work dutifully and with purpose as if they themselves actually owned a piece of the company that they are employed by. “Renters”, on the other hand, are the absolute opposite. These folks are lackadaisical, unmotivated, and seemingly only show up to collect a check. Sometimes, I suppose, you’ll stumble upon those who are natural “renters”, but more often than not, at least in manufacturing, the “renter” mentality is acquired. Huge, corporate manufacturing plants and their executives are almost solely preoccupied with one thing: turning a profit in order to appease the insatiable corporate beast, which takes the form of the board members. Employees at these companies are identified more like prisoners, with employee numbers and even bar codes, than like individuals with names and voices. So how then *would* you expect these employees to act? People, generally, are not stupid. They pick up on these subtle tones of being made to feel inferior right off the bat and react accordingly. They feel unappreciated and are paid little; some make no more than minimum wage. Because of this, they develop an “I don’t care” attitude and become lazy, complacent, and

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indifferent, the epitome of a “renter”. They are just kind of biding time until something better comes along and falls in their laps. If you were an employer at a premier shop looking to hire a skilled machinist, would you want to hire someone like this? Unfortunately for these people, especially the younger ones who are new to the workforce and originally chose manufacturing with the best of intentions, their acquired “renter” mentality has reduced them to the equivalent of tainted goods. It’s been said that one bad apple will spoil the whole bunch. Hiring someone who has learned little more than questionable work habits is rarely a wise decision.

Another looming reason that the machining trade is dying is because there is little to no knowledge that these jobs are even out there. Mike Cronin, writer for the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* and author of the article, “*Employers Complain of Shortage of Skilled Labor*”, quotes Jeff Kelly, who seems to agree. Jeff Kelly is the owner and CEO of Hamill Manufacturing and claims that his employees make between \$25,000 and \$70,000 a year. According to Cronin, Kelly states, “If you look at the macro level, there aren’t going to be enough people to replace the workers we’re going to lose.” Then he asks, “Who’s going to do the work that needs to be done, like the lineman to keep the electricity on?” Later on in the article, Cronin returns to Kelly who then says, “I can’t find enough workers because people aren’t aware that these jobs exist.” Now, in my eyes, the *order* of these statements is profound. Perhaps if Mr. Kelly first realized that

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people weren't aware and then advertised or maybe even did a little active recruiting, he could have helped to change the macro level and wouldn't have to ask about who's going to do the work. I have a feeling that there would be plenty of people who would jump at the opportunity to make \$25,000 to \$70,000 and learn a skilled trade in the process.

Cronin references that, "A survey done by Manpower Inc., a Milwaukee based international job-placement company, showed that U.S. employers consider finding skilled-trade workers their No.1 hiring challenge." What better way to face this challenge head-on than to get aggressive? Employers need to advertise and become active in the community as far as participating in job fairs, speaking and holding Q & A sessions at community centers, and even attending high school career days. Mr. Cronin also quotes Becca Dernberger, Manpower Inc.'s northeast division vice president who says, "People have to know that skilled trades are a viable career path." The skilled labor shortage is not going to fix itself. Employers need to be willing to do whatever is necessary to achieve an upswing in interest in the positions that they need to fill.

The involvement of local companies in creating and sustaining training programs outside of the workplace is a paramount necessity to the longevity of the American skilled laborer. It is clear that most precision machine shops, nationwide, are in dire straights when it comes to a steady supply of skilled workers with "hands-on" experience. They are simply not out there. When someone retires or quits, it's like losing your

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favorite tool and not being able to find one to replace it. You could travel from store to store, but to no avail. There are none stashed at the bottom of another stack, none in the stock room, or anywhere in inventory. There may be a few on a long backorder, but for now, there are none. Employers are experiencing this phenomenon more and more as time goes on. Mark Carter, author of Charleston Gazette (West Virginia) article *“Reinforcements needed, Plenty of jobs available for skilled machinists”* quotes one of the most comprehensive studies in years. According to Carter, the *“2005 Skills Gap Report – A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce”* notes:

The details behind the talent shortage reveal a stark reality. More than 80 percent of the respondents indicated that they are experiencing a shortage of qualified workers overall – with 13 percent reporting severe shortages and 68 percent experiencing moderate shortages. Also worrisome is the finding that 90 percent of the respondents indicated a moderate to severe shortage of qualified skilled production employees, including front-line workers such as machinists, operators, craft workers, distributors, and technicians.

He then goes on to state that:

An Industry Week article about the survey found particularly worrisome the fact that 83 percent of the respondents indicated they were experiencing difficulty in meeting customer demands because of a lack of skilled workers.

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In my personal experience, the key to success in manufacturing is meeting those customer demands, no matter what. Having one or two highly trained professionals focused on a task is far more beneficial towards meeting your goals than an entire hand full of low skilled and/or entry level employees, wandering aimlessly with no clear understanding of how to get the job done. Not meeting your customer's demands results in unhappy customers, resulting in no return work, resulting in no jobs, ultimately leading to closed doors.

While I believe that outside training programs are imperative, I understand that there are those who believe that there is nothing better than on-the-job instruction. The trainees, after all, would be learning that company's particular practices and processes. The argument could also be made that "green" trainees are more easily molded to suit the needs of a particular product line or department based on the discretion of the trainer, rather than someone with extensive outside training who is already set in their ways. While the benefits of pre-job training would be invaluable, the expense of time, money, and resources would be astronomical. Perhaps if a cooperative of many companies in a particular area pooled their resources and shared the cost and personnel time, a "super" program could be developed that would benefit every local shop in that area. Then, if the singular companies offer unique incentives and the trainees have the right to choose which participating company to work for, everybody wins.

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The unemployment crisis, due to the current recession, has provided a monumental horde of individuals who are eager to return to the workforce. This is the perfect juncture for not only manufacturing companies in general but also an entire industry to come together and make the best of an unfortunate situation while furthering their own success. There are hundreds of companies; nationwide, that could potentially profit from a collective effort while rebuilding the strength in numbers of skilled laborers and reinforcing America's reputation as an industrious and productive nation. It would be a shame to see the machining trade slip into history's oblivion given that much of America's history is illuminated by the creativity and innovations of inventors turned machinists in order to see their creations and their dreams come to life. We are hastening the end of an era by simply neglecting a few easily rectifiable problems. If the averseness to unify, reluctance to advertise, and the lack of training, or the unwillingness to do so are the only poor excuses we can muster to let this happen, then perhaps we deserve what we get. We still have time to reverse the decline of the American skilled laborer but the burning question in my mind is, "Will we?"