Are Women The Answer To The Shortage Of Skilled Workers In Manufacturing?
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Manufacturing is one of the few bright spots in the U.S. economy today, with economic activity in the manufacturing sector expanding in September for the 26th consecutive month, according to the Institute for Supply Management. Ironically, as the manufacturing sector continues to help lead this country's economic recovery, companies are reporting that they are having trouble finding qualified workers. A recent study from the Manufacturing Institute reported that almost 80 percent of American manufacturers are reporting trouble filling open positions despite a national 9 percent unemployment rate in the United States. In addition, 25 percent of the current manufacturing work force is over age 55, with few young skilled workers available to replace them as these longtime employees near retirement. The lack of skilled workers is one of the largest impediments to growth for manufacturing companies.

One way to address this problem would be to attract more women to manufacturing careers and mentor them so that they encourage other women to look at this sector for a career. Unfortunately, this country is doing the opposite: steering away millions of young Americans from manufacturing based on their gender.

Only 30 percent of the 14 million Americans employed in manufacturing are women. However, this represents 4 million American workers, which is not insignificant. As Sara Manzano-Diaz, director of the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau, stated: "Think of it this way: More women work in the manufacturing industry across this country than the total population of 21 states." Still, given the acute shortage of skilled workers, the manufacturing sector should be a very attractive option for women looking for employment.

A recent survey by Bayer showed that some of the top reasons women are underrepresented in manufacturing include the lack of quality science and math education programs and the presence of persistent stereotypes that say careers in science, technology, engineering and math are not for women. This despite the fact that elementary school girls are earning higher grades in math and science than are boys.

The problem of attracting more women to manufacturing is tied to the sector's overall perception problem. Manufacturers are working to educate young workers that this is not the old manufacturing world of low pay and dirty work. Today's manufacturing, in fact, offers competitive wages and benefits, often significantly better than the service sector, and is high tech, with clean and modern facilities.

The Cleveland-based Precision Metalforming Association has decided to take a leadership role in encouraging the growth of women in manufacturing and combating gender bias. PMA hosted the first annual "Women in Manufacturing" symposium in Cleveland from Oct. 25-26. The event was designed exclusively for women who have chosen a career in manufacturing, and it attracted more than 100 women leaders from around the country.

One topic that received much attention was workplace flexibility. There are certainly challenges in the manufacturing sector to both attract and retain women employees, including developing an approach to flexibility that will work in manufacturing. Without formal workplace flexibility policies adapted to fit the various manufacturing work places, women and men alike will continue to struggle with balancing work and family. In addition, the discussion showed that women in the manufacturing industry are hungry for advice, and formal and informal mentoring programs are essential in order to develop the next generation of women leaders in manufacturing.

The latest report from the U.S. Labor Department listed 240,000 open jobs in manufacturing in August 2011. This acute talent shortage, which threatens the manufacturing sector's recovery -- a sector that accounts for about 12 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product -- could be solved by encouraging young, talented workers, regardless of gender, to pursue careers in a thriving industry. That was the message at the "Women in Manufacturing" symposium, and that's the message we need to send to the next generation of women in order for manufacturing to grow in this country.

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