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In-demand metal workers make hard cash

The money is good, but E.J. Ajax, Toro and other metal manufacturers in Minnesota are having trouble convincing people that they're hiring.

H.J. Cummins, Star Tribune

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When a freezer door swings open anywhere in North America, odds are it's on hinges manufactured by E.J. Ajax & Sons Inc. in Fridley.

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Those metal cylinder parts come fully formed, thousands an hour, out of giant punch-press machines that require just one operator for every four of them.

Those machines and that very well-trained operator are how E.J. Ajax continues to win contracts over competitors in China and Taiwan and Mexico to manufacture freezer hinges, door frames for fire extinguisher cabinets, and safety latches inside the handles of stove-top pressure cookers.

Erick Ajax has every confidence that his family-owned factory can stay competitive, except for one thing: He can't find enough well-trained operators.

"We're in the absolute race for our lives for high-skilled talent," said Ajax, vice president of the family-owned company with 50 employees.

It's a worry spread across much of Minnesota's metal manufacturing industries.

With demand up and qualified workers down, the industry is spreading the word that good-paying jobs are there for the taking -- talking to minority recruiters as well as high school students.

For faster results, companies also have turned to developing more of their own talent in-house, including a new program through Hennepin Technical College that gets students on the job after just 12 weeks of

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basic training.

"We have some positions, frankly, where we have virtually given up finding outside candidates," said Rick Olson, director of operations at Toro Co. in Bloomington. "So, we're growing that talent within our own workforce."

A good career

At E.J. Ajax, Dan McGee is an example of what's possible. This fall McGee, 21, will finish a two-year degree in machine-tool technology at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. He has worked at E.J. Ajax through the schooling, so the company paid for it, and it now will pay for the bachelor's degree in manufacturing that McGee has decided to pursue nights at the University of Minnesota -- while he works days as an apprentice.

A graduate of Totino-Grace High School in Fridley, McGee said the assumption was he would go straight to college.

"But I've sort of been wrenching on things all my life, and I just see that metal is involved in so many different areas of life," he said. "The things we make are everywhere. I think there's always going to be work making good-quality parts."

By age 25, McGee will have a college degree, five years' experience, no student debt, and a job that pays \$50,000 to \$60,000 and full benefits, Ajax said.

"And this guy will be helping us compete in the global marketplace," he said.

Years of bad manufacturing news chased away other young Minnesotans -- driving precision-metal graduates down from 2000 in 1997 and '98 to about 900 last year, in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU), which includes Hennepin Technical College.

And the news has been bad: Minnesota lost 44,000 manufacturing jobs since 2001, according to state labor data.

The trend reversed during the past year, as the state added 2,400 jobs. More important, manufacturers said, demand for high-skilled workers stayed high through the years. So did wages, state labor data show: The average Minnesotan earned \$785 a week last year; the average in manufacturing was \$1,100 to \$1,500.

















"At the same time we were reading about the decline in manufacturing, we had nearly perpetual openings," said Olson, at Toro. The Shakopee plant, for example, which produces lawn-mower parts, had anywhere from one to 25 openings at a time, in a workforce of about 225, he said.

More training

"Fast Track Training for Today" is a new course by Hennepin Technical College, starting Sept. 19. It begins with a basic introduction to metal manufacturing for 12 weeks; then the students take full-time

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jobs, and the rest of the six-month training is a combination of more classes and on-the-job training, said Joe Fredkove, director of training and business development for Hennepin Technical College in Plymouth.

"The industry told me, 'We can't wait two years for people,' " Fredkove said.

The college also responds to manufacturers' specific requests, including, recently, one from Toro to train workers to cut sheet metal with lasers.

"For the most part, these people were doing other manufacturing jobs," Olson said. "If they wanted to go through the training and they qualified, they could take the classes while they're still working at their other jobs."

Toro has a tradition of developing in-house talent. Gabe Icaza started at the company as a welder 19 years ago. Four years later, he trained for a higher-skilled job running computer-programmed machinery.

After six years of that, he stepped into an 8,000-hour apprentice program that took him into the company's product-development lab, working on product innovation.

"Every time, it was for a more interesting job, and a better-paying job, that required more specialized skills," Icaza said. "It has helped me, personally, and it helped the company fill certain positions."

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