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U.S.

To Recruit Workers, Manufacturers Go to Parents' Nights

Facing low unemployment, companies try to convince parents to recruit their children; 'You know, not everyone is an accountant'



Parents of high-school students in Fort Collins, Colo., recently attended a "Parents' Night" event where area manufacturers promoted trade careers to their children. PHOTO: CLAYTON JENKINS STUDIOS

By *Jennifer Levitz*

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Nearly 200 parents of high-school students in Fort Collins, Colo., recently gathered for "Parents' Night." Their children, they were told, could have great, well-paying careers while being "the next generation of makers."

The venue? Woodward Inc., an engine and equipment components plant looking for ways to line up the next generation of employees amid a dearth of manufacturing workers nationwide.

"We're really trying to get after the parents—the parents are influential with their kids," said Keith Korasick, Woodward's vice president of operations, who started as a machinist there 26 years ago. "Our message to the parents was 'there's another option.' You can't have everybody be a lawyer."

To attract America's youth onto the factory floor, manufacturers have tried many tactics from hosting high school tours to providing apprentice programs. Their latest strategy is targeting parents.

In Story County, Iowa, where the unemployment rate is 1.4%, Kreg Enterprises Inc. held its first "Parents' Night" earlier this year to tout careers in toolmaking. Toyota Motor Corp.'s manufacturing plant in Indiana held its first "Parents' Night Out" in October and plans events for January and March. In Monroe, Ohio, building-materials maker Deceuninck North America this year began hosting parent events on evenings and weekends.

The recruiting tactic aims to persuade today's highly involved moms and dads that manufacturing work can lead to satisfying—and lucrative—careers for their children with the added benefit of keeping them nearby. It also reflects the strain low unemployment has put on

manufacturers that have 400,000 open positions, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“The typical family Christmas letter likes to brag on the kids going to four-year institutions,” said Jeff Weld, a senior policy adviser to the White House on science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. “It’s harder to sell, ‘my kid is a welder’ even though a modern welder can make great pay.”



Employers are spreading the message that teens with skills to fix machinery or design products are highly valued and that companies will even pay for them to attend school. PHOTO: CLAYTON JENKINS STUDIOS

In a time when many parents are worried about the cost of college, employers are spreading the message that teens with skills to fix machinery or design products are highly valued and that companies will even pay for them to attend school. Still, barriers to persuading parents can be high given some skepticism about manufacturing as a stable career.

The number of manufacturing employees has been steadily rising since the recession, and open manufacturing positions are at their highest level since 2001.

In South Carolina, the Greenville Chamber of Commerce recently invited parents of high school seniors to a first-time manufacturing-themed “Parents’ Night” where mothers and fathers networked directly with companies that touted notable perks.

There recruiters from Greenville-based Michelin North America Inc. promoted a program in which the tire maker covers costs for students to complete a two-year program in mechatronics at a technical college, while they work 20 hours a week.

After finishing the program, the students are eligible to be hired by the company as full-time technicians. Annual pay starts at around \$53,000 with eligibility for overtime and benefits that include tuition reimbursement for future degrees, said Leesa Owens, Michelin’s director of state, local government and community relations. Ms. Owens said the program lets Michelin build its own talent pool in a tight labor market.

Nester McSween-Abel, who attended the Greenville parents’ night, said she is now re-examining her expectations for her 17-year-old son Avery, who took SAT prep classes and has been on the university track.

Ms. McSween-Abel, who works in accounting, completed some college but didn’t earn a bachelor’s degree and wanted better for her son. But now, she is talking to Avery about possibly starting at a technical college where he can learn a skill that can pay for his education and serve as a safety net.

“A lot of times we send our kids to college but they don’t have a skill to fall back on,” Ms. McSween-Abel said. “When they come out, it’s like, ‘what do I do?’”

Manufacturers have long courted schools as a way to make inroads with students. The new push to directly market to parents came after surveys showed the parents held dated views, envisioning manufacturing as grimy factories and production-line jobs, said Erin Streeter of the National Association of Manufacturers.

In February, the trade group began a social-media campaign aimed at wooing parents.

“Parents are the missing part of this. Parents have a lot of influence,” said Jacob Castillo, the economic development manager for the workforce agency in Larimer County, Colo., where the unemployment rate is 2.3%. The agency recently helped organize the “parents’ night,” which was hosted by a coalition of manufacturers, at Woodward in Fort Collins.

Across the country, earnings for production and other nonsupervisory workers in manufacturing averaged \$21.06 an hour in November, according to federal data. Average hourly earnings for all private-sector production and nonsupervisory workers across the economy were \$22.24, based on preliminary data.

In reality, the manufacturing jobs being created today don’t look like the old ones, said Nicole Smith, the chief economist at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. The newer jobs often involve machinery that requires significant training, Ms. Smith said.

Still, some parents have a “deep well of anxiety” about the sector, worrying about employers shipping jobs to Mexico or China, said Josh Weissman, a technology-education teacher at Poudre High School in Fort Collins, Colo. Some parents “have a pretty hard prejudice against me advocating for manufacturing jobs,” said Mr. Weissman, who has helped manufacturers communicate with parents.

In Slater, Iowa, parent Don Catus, a management information consultant at an annuity company, said his views on manufacturing as an option for his 16-year-old son, Spencer, are evolving.

At first, Mr. Catus, who felt his status as a university graduate gave him added security in the recession, wasn’t thrilled Spencer even enrolled in a building and trades class at school because that meant less time for academic subjects.

But then Mr. Catus saw his son’s passion for hands-on work—including Spencer launching a mini-business fixing smartphone screens for friends.

With four children, Mr. Catus said he isn’t in a position to finance all of college and worries about debt. And at the “Parents’ Night” at Kreg tool company in nearby Huxley, he felt encouraged after meeting workers who seemed to have interesting and fulfilling careers.

“I just thought, well, you know, not everyone is an accountant,” he said.

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