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INSIGHT CONTRIBUTOR

Not Your Grandfather's Factory: Modernizing Manufacturing to Attract Millennials

by Lisa Ryan | Founder, Grategy

Why is engagement such a big deal in manufacturing and the skilled trades? Because according to a 2013 industry report, for every four trade positions that workers retire from, the industry is producing only one replacement. Worse yet, it's predicted that in the next decade, that 2 million out of the 3.5 million manufacturing jobs available will go unfilled because of the lack of available talent.

Now you may be asking, how can that be? With millions of jobless Millennials, who happen to be facing an unemployment rate that is double the national rate, don't we have enough people to fill those positions? Not until we change the image and perception of manufacturing – for both kids and their parents.

For the past two generations, young professionals haven't exactly been leaping at the chance to work in manufacturing. Part of the problem is the stigma that manufacturing has - working in an unclean environment, with outdated thinking, and little room for growth. The other, bigger issues are the parents who have discouraged their kids from attending trade or technical school and instead promote the value of a four-year degree from a college or university. According to the National Association of Manufacturers and the Manufacturing Institute (NAM), only 3 in 10 parents would consider encouraging their child toward a manufacturing career. The perception has been that you go into the trades if you are not "college material." And parents want their kids to be "college material."

As the United States is now undergoing a "manufacturing renaissance" and looking to produce their goods on American soil again, there is an urgent and growing need for new talent.

So, how do you make manufacturing jobs more attractive and appealing to prospective employees? You can start by modernizing your brand. If your company is stuck in an old, calcified way of doing business, you're going to have a hard time finding and keeping younger workers.

Today's workers are digital natives. They are "wired" for technology in a way unlike any previous generations, and they expect to access it in the workplace. That's why it's critical for manufacturers to not only have cutting edge Industry 4.0 technology available, companies need to promote the technology used in their production process. Millennials will be pleased, if not surprised, to know that more than two-thirds of U.S. manufacturing companies are adopting 3D printing and more than half use robots.

Look for ways to better utilize mobile devices, videos and virtual reality in your hiring process as well as throughout the plant. Millennials are used to watching videos to learn about new things, so why not use YouTube or another video website to give potential hires a realistic view of "a day in the life" of a worker at your facility. Keep the videos to 2-3 minutes or less and capitalize on the "wow" factors of the job. Not sure what they are? Ask your current team members what they enjoy most about their job. You may even want to interview them and let them share their story in the video. In doing so, you're letting job applicants know that this isn't their grandfather's factory!

One of the first places to start is your company website. Yes, it's a great place to share what your company is all about, but it needs to be real – not a bunch of mumbo-jumbo "marketing speak." Look for ways to share your

company culture and mission. What is it like to work there? Demonstrate how your products and services serve a greater mission than simply making a profit. Take advantage of your online presence to show how your company makes a positive impact on society.

Next, check out your social media. (Now, if you're saying "What's that?" or "That's just a fad,"), you have your work cut out for you.

Figure out where your potential hires are hanging out. They may not be on Facebook, they may choose Instagram, Twitter, or LinkedIn instead. It's important to make sure your channels are active and up-to-date. Give your employees opportunities to share what's going on from their perspective. Post pictures from social events, charitable projects, and other fun occasions. Does your company look like a fun place to work from a social media standpoint? If not, look for ways to improve public perception. When done well, this can be a relatively quick fix - just start posting! When you have an active, engaging online social media presence, it builds credibility with potential hires from the younger generations.

Finally, keep in mind that Millennials are always connected. They look for one-on-one communication and immediate feedback. They consider their managers and leaders their peers and want to have access to them. If the only time you're giving feedback is during the annual review process, you're going to lose. There are lots of online tools, pulse-type surveys, and artificial intelligence programs that can help give feedback on demand. Communicating frequently and keeping employees in the loop will do wonders for engagement and performance development.

The digital nature of today's manufacturing is opening up many opportunities for skilled positions, transforming the manual nature of a factory job to the high-tech environment it is today. According to Vicki Holt, President and CEO for Protolabs, "Digital manufacturing is revitalizing our industry and is igniting new opportunities. The skills gap presents a critical roadblock for all of us. But it's encouraging to see a renewed optimism from a new generation of workers, and to hear that they understand this isn't their grandparents' manufacturing industry. Much work remains ahead of us, but this is a good start."

Lisa Ryan helps organizations who want to keep their top talent from becoming someone else's. She is the Founder of Grategy and is an award-winning speaker and best-selling author of ten books, including "Manufacturing Engagement: 98 Proven Strategies to Attract and Retain Your Industry's Top Talent." Learn more at www.LisaRyanSpeaks.com.



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