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## FOCUS ON THE WorkForce

# Manufacturing Offers Real Opportunities

A joint study by The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM; Washington, DC) and Deloitte & Touche (New York) estimated that the mass retirement of baby-boom-generation workers will create a need for 10 million skilled employees between 2012 and 2020. Faced with a lack of qualified job applicants, manufacturers are losing their ability to maintain production levels. Given the strong demand for machinists, engineers, and craft workers, why is it so hard to recruit new talent?

At every turn, manufacturing's image is taking a beating. The constant barrage of negative messages has turned the next generation away from a career in machining or engineering. As a result, unfortunately, young people no longer see manufacturing as a good place to earn a living.

This situation is all too familiar to Michael Fitzgerald, president and CEO of Acero Precision (Newtown Square, PA). For Acero, attracting the right people has been a key factor in maintaining 25 years of steady growth, and has

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One reason may be the flood of dire messages about losing manufacturing jobs to China, Korea, Mexico, or any other place having cheap labor. Certainly we are losing important manufacturing jobs, but cheap foreign labor is not the only reason.

Another reason is that we have been our own worst enemy. Through our media and government regulations, we have created a dismal image of manufacturing and manufacturing-related jobs. For example:

- People working in manufacturing try to raise their children to "have a better life."
- The most common articles about manufacturing are either about layoffs, offshoring, industrial accidents, or toxic spills.
- Newspaper and magazine features on "the best places to work" are typically about Google, Microsoft, or other software companies.
- Dramatic press releases about "dirty manufacturing," and how new regulations are required to clean up industry, are commonplace.

contributed to the company remaining unscathed by the 2008–2009 recession.

Additionally, like many other high-tech machine shops, Acero needs skilled employees to help the organization take advantage of large investments in technology. Computerized equipment, CNC machines, CAD/CAM, and lean processes have greatly enhanced manufacturing job descriptions and job satisfaction.

Acero promotes enhanced job descriptions and stimulating work environments to help overcome manufacturing's outdated image. For technologically advanced shops, attracting, retaining, and motivating the best people is essential, yet the talent pool remains shallow.

Fitzgerald has successfully motivated existing and prospective talent by sending them off-site to see their products perform in the real world. The Field Experience Program gives Acero employees the opportunity to see first-hand how components made by Acero are used in medical devices, motorsport, industrial applications, and so on.



*Acero Precision's Field Experience Program gives employees the opportunity to see how components made by the group are used. Most recently, the program sent Acero's engineering team to the American Le Mans Series (ALMS) race at Lime Rock Park (Lime Rock, CT) to spend time with the Highcroft Honda Performance Development Team.*

Most recently, The Field Experience Program sent Acero's engineering team to the American Le Mans Series (ALMS) race at Lime Rock Park (Lime Rock, CT). Spending time with the Highcroft Honda Performance Development Team enabled Acero engineers to accelerate their ability to quickly and effectively solve complex problems. For the engineers, the experience translates into strategies for more productive manufacturing.

In Fitzgerald's words: "Field experience offers far more than first-hand experience. It is essential because it builds self-confidence and passion. It connects our employees with the importance of what they're making, and they become very motivated to make it even better."

Additionally, shops like Acero need to address the fact that many engineering students have not considered a career in precision machining. By introducing the unique benefits of a career in precision machining, Acero strives to open the eyes of these young professionals. "I love it when, after we explain the shop and what we do, I begin to see a spark of enthusiasm," comments Fitzgerald. "It's like the individual's mind opens up and says: 'Wow! I want to do this!'"

To find open minds, Acero proactively attracts and develops its workforce through cooperative arrangements with trade schools and universities, including Drexel University (Philadelphia). These intern programs enable Acero to scout for and recruit bright people who are just beginning their careers.

Fitzgerald points out, "Intern programs are good for the student, good for us, and great for manufacturing as a whole. The more practical shop experience a student has when they hit the job market, the better it is for everybody."

Manufacturing is a necessary and key contributor to a strong economy, but requires a talented, energized workforce. If the US as a whole does not do what's necessary to reinvigorate the workforce, it will be difficult to succeed in producing the products demanded by our population within the country's borders, and we will become more dependent upon imports. If manufacturing is to flourish once again, manufacturing professionals must devote time to image building, invest in people, and emphasize multidisciplinary cooperation.

As Henry Ford so eloquently said, "Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success." **ME**