

Editorial

SKILLED TRADES ARE NOT "SECOND-RATE" JOBS

The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

John W. Gardner

The press release on my desk this morning said, "The (precision metal working) industry cannot attract enough qualified applicants. As many as 1,500 jobs a year (in the Chicago area alone) are going unfilled." So what else is new? That's just hard proof confirming the suspicion many of us have had for some time. Some of the best, most qualified and experienced people in our shops are reaching retirement age, and there's no one around to fill their spots. And, if the situation is bad in the metal working trades in general, it's even more critical in the gearing industry. Being small and highly specialized, gear manufacturing attracts even less attention and finds recruitment harder than the other precision metal trades.

Why is this? It's easy to point fingers and beat up on the education system. You know the litany by heart. "We don't do as well as the Japanese." "Our kids lack discipline and respect for hard work." "Nobody knows how to teach math and science anymore." "The government isn't spending enough money on education." But surely these are half-truths at best.

This same news release hit on something that may be closer to the mark. "Experts believe society has pushed the idea that to succeed, everyone must have a college education and has the notion the manufacturing jobs are second-class careers." This



time, at least, the experts are on to something.

If, as I do, you have late high school or college age people in your life, and you listen to them and their friends as they discuss the serious business of planning their careers, you will see some disturbing pictures emerge. Few, if any of them, even consider *not* going to college. This does not necessarily have anything to do with a burning desire for higher education on their part.

They go because, "All my friends are going," or "My parents will kill me if I don't," or "You can't earn any money if you don't go to college." They ask, "What would I do if I didn't go to college? Flip hamburgers?"

And what will they be studying at college? "I dunno. Marketing, I guess." "Business." "Pre-law, maybe."

Now, there's nothing wrong with learning marketing, business, or preparing for law school. But the fact is, the nation can use only so many marketing managers and business school grads, and it already has too many lawyers. (What are all these people going to market if there's no one around to manufacture anything?)

What is sad and disturbing about these young people is that many of them will go on to college, prepare for

careers in which they are only moderately interested, perform indifferently, and graduate frankly ill-prepared to do much of anything useful. They and/or their parents will be saddled with thousands of dollars worth of debt, and the only jobs they'll qualify for are entry level office positions paying less than \$20,000 per year.

These young people are not stupid or ill-disciplined, nor are they, to use the current teen-aged term, "burn-outs," dabbling in drugs or in trouble with the law, and with no use for or interest in honest work. They're bright, eager, hard-working young men and women who are being pressured by their peers, their parents, and their school guidance counselors to think that aspiring to anything less than a college education is to be a "failure," and that any job that doesn't require a college diploma is "second-rate".

This is a dangerous set of misperceptions. It undervalues many important jobs in our society and overvalues others and, in the process, skews in a negative way the number of people available to do the jobs society needs done.

Don't misunderstand me. I believe in higher education. Its value has been the subject of many of my editorials over the last six years. A college education provides opportunities that should be available to everyone who wants to take advantage of them. But it's not the only game in town. Contrary to what we, with the best of intentions, may have taught our children, not everyone has to go to college to have either a decent sense of self-worth or a decent job with a good salary and a chance for advancement.

College is a particular kind of higher education that has its uses, but it can't teach everyone everything. Not every

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job vital to our economy requires four years of college. And, contrary to popular opinion, college does not provide the advanced training necessary to qualify for many highly skilled jobs. Furthermore, lack of interest in the traditional scholarly and professional training that colleges provide best does not make for a "second-class" employee.

But that's not the message we give our young people.

In the meantime, the metal working industries are short some 1500 workers every year in the Chicago metropolitan

area alone, and we have no reason to think the situation is much better anywhere else in the country or that it will improve in the near future.

I'm not sure how we got to this place in our thinking about work. For my father's generation, high school was the end of the educational line for most people. Many were unable to remain in school even that long. Those who qualified for skilled apprenticeship programs in the "trades" were to be envied. No one thought that a young man or woman learning a skill that would provide economic security for a lifetime might be a "failure" because that skill was acquired on the job instead of on the college campus. "Trades" were not

thought of as second choices for people too poor or unambitious to go to college. They were honest jobs requiring just as much hard work and training as any other. No one was embarrassed to say, "I'm a precision gear maker."

These jobs haven't changed. They still require intelligence and hard work. They are demanding and challenging; they provide a decent living and plenty of opportunity for advancement. No one needs to be embarrassed to admit to working in a gear shop.

It's our thinking on the subject that's changed. Because precision metal working or gear manufacturing are not necessarily "glamorous" or "professional," the highly qualified young people who might enter these jobs are not encouraged to even consider them. Maybe if somebody did a t.v. series called "LA Gear Cutting" and cast it with beautiful people in tailor-made coveralls, the job would be more appealing.

A more practical suggestion is to begin with our own attitudes. Those of us familiar with the gear business, whether we are managers, foremen, or operators, can encourage the young people we know to consider the possibilities of entering a "trade." We can inform them of the realities of work in skilled jobs like gear manufacturing: That during the last 40 years the U.S. has never been able to produce enough qualified precision metal workers to fill industry needs; that these jobs can pay as much as \$35,000 to \$50,000 a year; that even during their first year of training, precision metal working apprentices can expect to earn nearly \$20,000 annually; that training is usually subsidized by the employers; that at age 26, a young tool and die maker can earn about \$40,000 in contrast to the mechanical engineer of the same age, who will earn around \$35,000.

Talk to the guidance counselors at your local schools. Do they know these facts? What are their attitudes about non-college job opportunities? Do they consider such careers "second-class" choices? Are they aware of the jobs available locally in gear manufacturing? Do our high schools provide any kind

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of shop education that might begin to steer qualified young people toward the skilled trades we desperately need?

We can also recruit capable young people to our own training programs. We can encourage organizations like the Tooling and Manufacturing Association, which has a program that actively works to spread the word about skilled precision metal working jobs to high

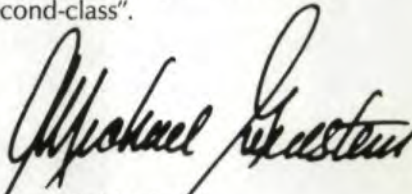
school guidance counselors.

We can become involved in the efforts of local community colleges, many of whom are in the forefront of providing advanced manufacturing training. Working in conjunction with local industries, these colleges are providing classes, not for degree programs, but to support and supplement the on-the-job training that local manufacturers provide. Such school programs can be life-savers for the medium-to-small manufacturer who does not have

the resources to provide an elaborate training program of his own. The offer of used machinery or time and expertise to such programs can help begin to close the gap between our need for trained workers and their availability. Discussions with school administrators about the need for such programs can be an important first step.

Those thousands of vacancies that go unfilled every year are vital to the success of our industry. Every year they remain vacant weakens our competitive position. It is not enough to complain about "inadequate training" or an "unskilled work force." We have a responsibility to get out the word about the opportunities in our field. We know that, far from being "second-rate", the skilled workers on our shop floors are talented specialists essential to the survival of our businesses. We have to let the rest of the world know that too.

Excellence in gear manufacturing is as important to our society as excellence in either plumbing or philosophy. If we allow gearing jobs to go unfilled because of some mistaken notion that they are "humble" or not worthwhile, not only will both our pipes and our theories fail to hold water, but our machinery, our businesses, and our economy will also suffer. Ultimately, it will be our society that ends up as "second-class".


Michael Goldstein,
Editor/Publisher

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