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Unemployment remains high, yet manufacturing employers can't find workers

By ERICA BOURIS, Special to The Daily Transcript
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With national unemployment rates at 9.1 percent, it might be hard to imagine that there are companies struggling to find workers. It is especially hard to imagine that these companies would be in the manufacturing industry, an area hit hard by the recent recession and on the decline in the United States for more than 30 years.

In California, the most recent data from the California Employment Development Department (EDD) shows that in March 2011, manufacturing was the only sector in San Diego County to show net job loss, with 400 jobs eliminated.

Yet, a manufacturing worker shortage is precisely what many top labor economists, policymakers and industry executives are worried about. A 2009 employer survey from the National Association of Manufacturers showed nearly a third of manufacturing companies are facing "severe and critical skilled manufacturing labor shortages." The Department of Labor, particularly during 2009-2010 when it had an influx of funds due to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, directed millions in funding to skilled manufacturing job training and placement programs. The National Skills Coalition, a work force development research and think tank, reports growth in manufacturing jobs and notes that by 2012, more than 40 percent of manufacturing jobs will require some college or post-secondary education.

According to the group, there simply are not enough potential manufacturing workers with the requisite skill set, meaning that occupations such as machinists continue to land in the "top 10" list of jobs where labor shortages are predicted.

In San Diego, the manufacturing base has been on a steady decline. According to the 2011 report from the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. and the Kyser Center for Economic Research, San Diego County has lost more than 28,000 jobs in the last decade, and currently employs less than 100,000 workers in manufacturing jobs. Yet according to the same report, there are some manufacturing sectors within the county that have experienced growth -- particularly biotechnology and defense, which has benefited from federal spending.

Local manufacturing employers concur that they are dealing with a complicated work force picture. A shortage of workers with particular skill sets "absolutely remains an issue," according to Michael Gompers, president of San Diego-based Clint Precision Manufacturing.

Gompers' small precision manufacturing firm employs about 20 people, and while he is grateful that he has low turnover and staff who have been with him a long time, he said it would be "nearly impossible to find a precision welder if I lost one of those guys." The company is open to the idea of hiring younger talent and providing training, but Gompers said that in many cases, younger employees "lack the drive to work hard ... and they don't have the patience to learn to work to the specifications and precision our business requires."

Johnson Matthey, an international company that sets up and operates computerized numerical controlled (CNC) Swiss screw machines, CNC mills, lathes and electrical discharge machines, as well as related equipment to fabricate precision metal parts, has faced similar challenges. It currently employs more than 100 skilled manufacturing employees in its San Diego facility. According to Nancy Boessow, who works in human resources for the firm, there are "ebbs and flows" in the company's ability to find and hire the workers it needs.

Boessow said it has become even more challenging recently.

"The agencies that we contract through are finding less and less qualified candidates to fill these positions. They are quite honest that the labor pool is just not there," she said.

At present, the company is trying to hire four machine operators. "At this moment, we have no candidates in the pipeline to interview," Boessow said.

These challenges may be amplified as new manufacturing facilities are built in the region. For instance, Soitec, a French-owned manufacturing company, plans to build a 200,000-square-foot solar energy manufacturing facility by 2013 and will



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need to hire more than 400 employees, many of them skilled manufacturing positions.

At the national level, manufacturing has been a leader in the gradual economic recovery, rebounding quickly -- particularly in the Midwest. If these trends play out in San Diego, this could make the shortage of a skilled manufacturing work force an even more pressing issue.

Efforts are under way in San Diego to address this labor shortage. San Diego City College revamped its Manufacturing Engineering Technology program, working closely with an industry advisory board to ensure that the training students receive is aligned with what will be expected of them in the workplace.

A group of organizations including CleanTECH San Diego, BIOCOM, San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp., San Diego Center for Algae Biotechnology and the San Diego Workforce Partnership formed the San Diego Biofuels Initiative, which was one of just five projects chosen to receive \$4 million in grant funds from the state to help build the biofuels industry and train workers -- including skilled manufacturing workers -- for the jobs to come.

And for more than a decade, Johnson Matthey has funded a scholarship to enable high school students to study machine technology at San Diego City College.

Yet despite these efforts, Boessow and Gompers say there is still "a shortage of local training programs" producing skilled workers ready to step into manufacturing positions. And while San Diego's manufacturing sector is smaller than it has been in the past, preparing workers for these jobs is still a critical part of the region's economic health. Skilled manufacturing positions average better wages (\$16-27 an hour), benefits and opportunities for advancement, making them an attractive component of San Diego's employment landscape.

-Bouris is a San Diego-based freelance writer.

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