



ON THE JOB HUNT

On The Job Hunt: Unfilled Jobs Across America, Are You Qualified?

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Every day we hear the steady drumbeat. Unemployment over 9 percent. People who can't [find jobs](#) exhausting their unemployment benefits. Going months – even years without work. Losing their homes to foreclosure. Marital and family breakups. Homelessness. It is tragic. No question.

But here's a bizarre twist. While millions of people can't find work, there are many American companies who can't find people to fill open jobs. Thousands of jobs. Good paying jobs.

Drive along Riley Street in Zeeland, Mich., and you'll come across an unusual sight in America.

It's a "now hiring" sign. It has been there for more than a year. It's in front of

the Gentex Corporation. Gentex is a high-tech manufacturer that makes “smart” rearview mirrors for cars.

Mirrors that darken at night. Mirrors that dim your high beams to an oncoming car. That have backup camera displays in them. That will tell your cruise control that you’re getting too close to the vehicle in front of you. They are in high demand – not just in the U.S., but among [automobile](#) manufacturers around the world. Gentex makes other products as well, including those new hi-tech windows for the Boeing 787 Dreamliner that darken at the touch of a button. Business is booming.

And Gentex has jobs it can’t fill. More than 200 of them. And it plans to add another 1,150 in the next five years.

“Our problem right now is – we’re growing like crazy.” That’s Bruce Los talking. He’s Gentex’s Vice President of Human Relations. He bears a striking resemblance to actor [Bruce Willis](#). He’s the guy in charge of finding people to fill vacant jobs.

But he’s having a big problem.

“Our problem is finding people who are qualified to work in this environment,” Los said. The type of workers he needs are engineers with advanced degrees. Highly skilled technical workers. And people who have a terrific work ethic. They’re just not out there. Los said it’s because of a lingering stigma around manufacturing.

“I think part of it is the mindset on manufacturing”, Los said. “People grow up and when you go home to mom and dad and say – hey – I’m going to go work in manufacturing, they’re kind of like oh – geez...you couldn’t find a real job somewhere?”

“When you’re at a cocktail party, do you want to say – my kid is going to Brown, or my kid is going to a technical school?” said Jeff Joerres, CEO of Manpower Group.

Every year, Manpower conducts a survey of how many American companies are having difficulty filling “mission critical” positions. In 2011, 52 percent said they were having problems.

Joerres said the lack of skilled labor is a result of too much pressure on students to go to a university rather than a technical school. “Back when I was growing up”, Joerres explains, “I was told – if you don’t go to university or college, you’re never going to make anything of yourself. Well, we’re paying the price for being a little melodramatic during those times.”

Just up the road from Milwaukee, in Germantown, Wisconsin, [human resources director](#) Tricia Hambly is trying to fill 30 open positions at MGS manufacturing.

“We can’t find people to fill the jobs”, she said. “We need skilled labor. And we just can’t find it”. MGS makes injection molded plastics. Disposable razors. Cellphone faceplates. The plastic housings for diabetes blood lancets. Sports mouthguards. If it’s made out of plastic, they make it here.

“We’re justifiably proud to put the MADE IN AMERICA sticker on our product”, says John Berg, MGS’s chief of marketing. With high tech engineering and innovation, they can do with one person what it takes the Chinese ten workers to do. MGS’s message to [China](#)? “We will kick 100% of your ass”, he said. “We will do whatever it takes to deliver the goods.”

What it takes is highly skilled toolmakers to craft the injection molds that stamp out millions of parts. And engineers to design those molds. They’re just not out there. With many of their toolmakers now in their 40s, and no one to succeed them when they retire, MGS is already panicking.

“How difficult is it to find people of this skill level”, I ask Hambly. “Very difficult”, she said. So difficult that if we came across the right candidate – whether we had an opening or not – we would hire them.”

Even operating a machine takes far more skill than it used to. It’s not just inserting a piece of metal and punching a button anymore. Machines that crank out dozens of parts with extraordinary precision each cycle require sophisticated programming. Operators often have to be programmers as well. At MGS, as a machine made the splash skirt for the bottom of a car bumper, robots whizzed and whirred and with extraordinary delicacy put fasteners into the appropriate slots. John Berg said its what takes to keep the machine running.

“A 2D and 3D part designer. A mold designer, a programmer, a pather, a number of different toolmakers. CNC machinists. We need a process engineer, material handlers, mold setup technicians, press operators and maintenance people to make sure the system runs.”

That’s a whole lot of jobs for people with the right skills.

Both Gentex and MGS have partnered with local community colleges to increase the stream of skilled workers. One of them is Waukesha County [Technical College](#) in Pewaukee, Wisconsin.

John Shiels is the associate dean of the industrial school. “We had over 500 openings in machining and tool and die last year and we had 20-40 people graduate from our program”, he told me.



Students at WCTC have a 95 percent employment rate. Many of them take on paid internships the moment they begin their studies – internships that often turn into full-time jobs.

“If people want to go to work in this field, there is a job waiting for them at the end of their education”, Shiels said.

Now comes the controversial part. In the past, it was popular for schools to ‘stream’ or ‘track’ students into various levels of study. The really bright ones would be ‘streamed’ toward 4-year college. Those whose scores were lower would be ‘tracked’ toward a community college or technical school. Sociologists railed against the practice, trotting out studies that showed a detrimental effect on students who weren’t given the same opportunities as others. Many schools dropped the practice like a hot potato.

Manpower’s Joerres believes it may be time to revisit the idea of tracking in order to provide more jobs for talented people – and create a rich crop of potential employees for companies that need the right talent to continue to grow and compete in 21st century manufacturing.

“Now is the time to be having that conversation”, Joerres said. “Because what’s really proud for a parent is to say my son or daughter has a job.”

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