

## Fridley firm gets nod from president

Article by: and JIM SPENCER Star Tribune's staff writers

Updated: June 16, 2011 - 8:50 PM

This is the vision: a new manufacturing age, when increased efficiency, innovation, technology and service are what give U.S. products an edge, and when a professional class of American manufacturing workers gets the bonus of a safer workplace and increased job satisfaction and pay.

A Fridley metal fabrication company hopes to be at the forefront of the new thinking, and last week it got a shout-out from the White House as President Obama announced an initiative to train and certify 500,000 U.S. manufacturing workers in the next five years.

The administration cited E.J. Ajax, 66-year-old maker of fasteners, brackets and other metal widgets, as a national model for its work melding manufacturing and industrial education.

Ajax, nonprofit partners and Hennepin Technical College in Brooklyn Park have teamed up on the M-Powered program, which provides workers with manufacturing skills and offers standardized certification.

"E.J. Ajax and Sons is a real-world example of how manufacturers and community colleges partnering t

o invest in workforce development is a win-win-win," said White House spokesman Matt Lehigh. "It's good for the company, good for the workers and good for the economy."

As part of the administration's initiative, businesses will advise community colleges on the skills that workers need, and trade associations will try to create uniform credentials that will be recognized across sectors of manufacturing.

The administration plans to spend \$2 billion to give community colleges the resources to institute these programs.

### **Need for skilled blue-collar workers**

"While we need skilled engineers and scientists, we also need skilled blue-collar workers," said Ron Bloom, assistant to the president for manufacturing policy.

"But when you roll this out locally at a community college, you will work with a group of local businesses," he said. "So you'll be pitching this to the men and women doing the hiring."

The administration also envisions 60 manufacturing extension centers nationwide to function as agricultural extension programs now do, helping people refine or refresh skills.

Ajax, a third-generation family company, isn't the only manufacturer involved in M-Powered. But Ajax has helped to shape the program from its start half

a dozen years ago.

## How M-Powered works

Once students are accepted as apprentices, Ajax pays their tuition to take them to journeyman certification and beyond. There's no requirement to stay when training is done, but in the past decade, owner Erick Ajax has had only one employee voluntarily leave for a different field. Right now, about a dozen of the firm's 35 employees are apprentices.

The program, Ajax said, is meant "to allow people to come in at the entry level and ascend a career ladder, to learn a trade, which provides job security for them and the opportunity to earn a family-sustaining wage and, most of all, be able to create enough value for our customers -- worldwide, we export about a third of our products -- that we can afford to pay them a competitive wage."

At the plant one recent afternoon, apprentice Althea DrePaul of Minneapolis ran a machine that clips and rounds the corners of aluminum sheets, as others worked similar single-function machines that bend and cut metal pieces. The training they are getting, said production supervisor and training director Rob Duvall, will prepare them to operate the high-tech, computer-driven fabricators that do the work of three of the old-school machines.

DrePaul started training after she was laid off as a home health aide. As a kid in Guyana, she received a brand-new bicycle, made in China. The spokes were

bent and the brakes didn't work. The disappointing memory now motivates her.

"I want to keep elevating myself, and keep learning because new technology comes out every day," she said. "I feel so great because our customers are so satisfied with their products. It's a revitalizing feeling."

Among the dividends of the investments are not only an impressive safety record -- no lost-time injuries since 1991 -- but an expectation for innovation and creativity that held the company over during the recession and continues to provide efficiency and cost savings for clients, Ajax said.

Ajax declined to discuss the company's earnings but said that they are above the industry average.

The economic changes from the recession mean that fewer workers have to produce more, at Ajax as is the case elsewhere. Erick Ajax sees the culture of his business as one that gives workers tools to make best use of technology and their own brains.

"We're not asking them to work harder," he said. "We're asking them to work smarter. They're truly delivering."

[mbaca@startribune.com](mailto:mbaca@startribune.com) • 612-673-4409 [jim.spencer@startribune.com](mailto:jim.spencer@startribune.com) • 202-408-2752