

Technology & Traditional Training Tools Jumpstarted a U.S. Manufacturing Renaissance; Now Let's Extend this Effective Dual Combo Across the Board to All Job Categories

When many people think about the skills gap in the United States, the picture they conjure in their mind is of a middle-aged worker walking slowly out of a crumbling brick-and-mortar manufacturing plant with nowhere to go, other than the local unemployment office. And to be sure there are many manufacturing plants – and workers leaving them – who have experienced this fate in growing numbers over the past few decades.

Yet while some American manufacturing jobs will never come back, the sourcing and conversion of materials still represents 35% of GDP. The death of US manufacturing has been foretold many times over the past four decades, but the reality is that the tide is turning and US manufacturing is resurgent. The new math of production is starting to dramatically shift the cost equation, and the efficiency advantage of going offshore is shrinking fast and will approach parity on many products. These facts, coupled with President Trump's push for "Made in USA," will drive a significant need for even more skilled trades talent.

Central to the renewal is a growing optimism that contemporary reskilling programs – utilizing a mix of technology and traditional training tools – can play a critical role as a catalyst across a broad array of sectors beyond just manufacturing. Part of the reason for this optimism is the historic role that manufacturing has played not just as a bulwark of the American economy, but also as the tip of the spear in the training and retraining of workers on the shop floor and beyond.

Indeed, HR departments in manufacturing environments are all too aware of the "skills gap" that some in the mainstream media seem to have noticed only recently. For the last several years, these HR managers have been solving for a retiring baby boomer generation, an aging workforce in general, a higher share of workers without a college degree than the economy overall, and the challenges of integrating the young talent they can attract into the increasingly flexible and productive manufacturing workforce environment.

Compounding their issues have been the ever-growing demands of increasingly distributed corporations. What was once a 10 person machine shop or distribution facility may now be part of a company with 100 locations of equal size. Even many large plants have been rolled up under a larger corporate umbrella. Some might argue it's never been more difficult to manage and train a workforce as it is today, largely because of the countervailing priorities of standardization, flexibility, and technology's appeal – or lack thereof – to differing generations within a manufacturing-centric workforce.

The first question often facing these consolidating companies was: How do you standardize training across many different geographies? The “old” model of relying on local community colleges makes it extremely difficult to use the same strategies and tactics across 5-50 different geographic markets.

At first blush, technology seems to be the solution, with an army of software-as-a-service education providers creating content that is distributed through the web or an app, so that employees can access the same content no matter where in the country (or world) they are. Certainly, as any purchaser of employee training products can see, technology is a key enabler to distributing uniform content across an enterprise, providing the scale and level of control management needs at unprecedented cost and visibility into learning progression.

But technology finds its limits in people’s capacity to utilize it. And some might argue that if there is one area in which technology isn’t in a position to change education holistically, it is likely manufacturing. After all, a 55-year-old machinist has been out of school for longer than a 22-year-old aspiring developer has been alive, and has likely never experienced education outside of a traditional classroom setting. Turning the machinist loose on an educational app probably won’t yield the same persistence and completion rates.

That’s why making learning work for everyone across a manufacturing environment means coupling technology with some traditional support structures: coaching, physical books that can be highlighted, and a class-like collaborative environment. This is the kind of training that HR managers in the world of manufacturing have been doing successfully for years and it is beginning to pay off.

Many in the manufacturing sector have shown that you can certainly teach an ‘old’ dog new tricks, by incorporating traditional training tools with technology. As a result, that sector is beginning to experience a resurgence and the lessons from that experience – the effective combining of technology and traditional training tools – can now be extended to other parts of the economy. The road back to strong GDP growth will still be bumpy, but at least it will be paved with more than just good intentions.

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