

## **Puts & Calls: Hal Walls / Where the jobs are (It's not where you think)**

**Sunday, February 27, 2005**

The dream of a college degree for anyone who wants it appears to be fading. The cost of a college degree, even at state-funded schools, has become prohibitive for the average student.

More importantly, the relevance and utility of a college degree are becoming increasingly questionable. Graduates with professional degrees find themselves unemployable upon graduation, and graduates with a liberal education find themselves neither rich nor enriched.

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The result for society is a large population of young people who, because they are priced out of college or because they have been allowed to waste their college experience, feel they have been cheated out of meaningful employment.

The irony is that there is a corresponding population of employers who feel they are being cheated out of qualified employees. A preoccupation with college degrees has led parents, students and administrators into the de facto, if unintended, position that the manual arts, skilled trades and professions that don't require a postsecondary degree should be discouraged in favor of graduating the maximum percentage of college-bound seniors.

The consequences of this attitude are particularly acute in manufacturing, where potential employees must overcome a negative stereotype before they even consider training for a career in a factory. Because factories are viewed as dirty, dangerous and boring places, skilled work in manufacturing is seldom considered as a career alternative.

This perception is unfortunate, for while everyone seems to know about the decline in manufacturing employment, very few people seem informed about the real growth in manufacturing and the nature of the manufacturing jobs that remain.

A modern manufacturing plant is well lit and well ventilated, with sound levels, air quality and ergonomic tools managed not only to meet government standards, but also to encourage long-term, productive employment.

More and more manufacturing workers find their influence on the workplace increasing as a result of participative management practices and such progressive concepts as self-directed teams. Employees are trained in information technology as well as in fabrication and assembly techniques. Today's factory worker is as likely to be wielding a mouse as a mallet. In short, this is not your grandfather's factory.

Aside from the training, the tools and the working environment, there is another notable aspect to a job in manufacturing. For those people who are mechanically inclined and who value tangible feedback, the experience of seeing and feeling the results of a day's effort is one that is not easily duplicated in a white-collar occupation.

The unique combination of mental, physical and emotional demands and the satisfaction of meeting those demands creatively and with disciplined precision results in a level of satisfaction that suits some people perfectly. However, instead of working in modern factories, many of those people are serving hamburgers or fine-tuning their resumes.

At a recent chapter meeting of the National Tooling and Machining Association, a member of the association's national board observed that the single issue that almost all members recognize as critical to their survival is a source of qualified employees. In my own experience in southwestern Pennsylvania, every colleague I know in our industry agrees with that assessment. The stream of applicants for factory jobs seems to have gone nearly dry.

Those of us who have tried to get the attention of local school boards on this subject seem to be talking to the wind. We are perplexed at the sight of young people passing up jobs in the \$10- to \$20-an-hour range to work in fast-food restaurants at single digit hourly wages with no fringe benefits.

We hear lamentations about the decline of manufacturing in America, but we get no response to the plea for trained workers who can breathe life and vitality into American manufacturing. We feel that there is a misguided fascination with symbolic degrees that confer upon their holders neither the knowledge nor the economic benefit that such degrees would imply.

Meanwhile, we see the quality of vocational education spiraling downward, with no remedy in sight and no recognition in educational circles that there is even a problem. To quote John W. Gardner, a recognized authority on education:

*"An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society that 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."*

**-- Excerpt from his book, "Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?"**

We need to value excellence in our plumbers and in our machinists, carpenters, welders and other citizens who work with their hands as well as their minds. It should be possible to do so without diminishing the stature of those who primarily think for a living.