

Viewpoint: Regional manufacturing endures, but must continue to adapt

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In the eyes of much of the world, Pittsburgh remains a manufacturing powerhouse. Images of steel plants churning away tend to stay in our collective memories. However, for those of us who live here, we know today's manufacturing doesn't look like that anymore.

While manufacturing is still important to the economic future of western Pennsylvania, the applications and ongoing requirements continue to evolve.

Over the past several decades, traditional manufacturing in our area has been overtaken by health care, education, autonomous vehicles, robotics and other disciplines. Due to those industries, our region was lifted out of the collapse of the steel industry to the wonder and admiration of other historically industrial-focused cities.

We are fortunate to have developed such a diverse economic base here. Manufacturing remains a key component due to historically significant companies like Koppers, mixed with the locally emerging downstream chemical businesses.

In order to move ahead, manufacturing needs to keep adapting to remain vibrant and growing, particularly in the area of talent attraction and development. Despite the rise of automation, manufacturers still need workers who possess technical or trade-based skills that machines cannot adequately perform. Although there are many attractive, well-paying jobs available for the right candidates, the demand remains unfilled.

According to the Allegheny Conference on Community Development's "Inflection Point: 2017-18" report, unemployment in the sectors including manufacturing runs higher (6.4 percent) than in other sectors, such as health care (2.9 percent).

The report adds that a significant challenge for employers is not only recognizing the need to prepare workers for lifelong learning and skill building, but also knowing specifically how to prepare individuals for work that is not yet clearly defined.

This requires closer collaboration between industry and higher education and will be crucial to aligning skill sets with developing needs. Two local examples of such work include the leadership development work that Robert Morris University is doing with Koppers and the investment Royal Dutch Shell made to further develop the Community College of Beaver County's process technology program.

On the talent side, The Manufacturing Institute has stated that, to attract the next generation, manufacturers also need to improve the perception of the industry as being "clean and safe" and "high tech" rather than "dirty and dangerous."

Locally, traditional heavy manufacturers in metals, tooling, chemicals and other segments continue to upgrade their facilities, making them less hazardous and more conducive to improved efficiencies and higher economics. That said, we need to do a better job of marketing the fact that, in many cases, manufacturing careers don't look like they once did.

In addition, a critical element of developing our talent pipeline is realigning the expectations of young students that they can attain "good careers" with a mix of education and training options that don't necessarily include the requisite bachelor's or master's degree.

While manufacturing may not regain its position as the core identity of the Pittsburgh region, it remains a strength of our region and an important link to our past. We need to be strategic in developing our next-generation workforce so that the manufacturing sector in Pittsburgh remains a core element of our economic future.

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