



Women of Aluma Trailers in Bancroft, Iowa, from left to right: Sienna Wolf, Leslie Wolf, Melissa Struecker, Anna Olsen, Kelsey Miller and Jennifer Jones.

It's Time to Get Smart About Women in Manufacturing

By Allison Grealis, Founder and President of Women in Manufacturing

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As the number of unfulfilled jobs in manufacturing grows, women remain an under-utilized source of workers and management employees. To change this dynamic, more role models and better awareness of the industry are needed.

The American manufacturing sector has been slowly and steadily rebounding from the Great Recession, bringing work back from overseas and creating more jobs here at home. The latest Institute for Supply Management report showed that manufacturing grew again in May 2015, bolstered by stronger factory activity, higher order numbers, and increased hiring. Additionally, monthly business conditions reports



Anna Olsen at Aluma.

produced by Precision Metalforming Association show that metalforming companies consistently predict either static conditions or positive developments.

But, these good numbers hide a troubling reality. Top research firms including Deloitte estimate that, over the next decade, around 4.3 million Americans will be needed to fill manufacturing jobs. Experts suggest that approximately 2.7 million jobs will be vacated by retirements and some 700,000 additional jobs will be created through business expansions. Current measurements show that we are nowhere near prepared to handle such demand and around 2 million of these jobs, nearly 67 percent, will go unfilled.

The 2015 One Voice for Manufacturing survey, an in-depth analysis of members of two manufacturing industry groups — the National Tooling and Machining Association and the Precision Metalforming Association — found that the struggle to hire skilled workers is already plaguing a sector trying to recover. Over 84 percent of survey respondents reported having job openings for skilled positions and over 95 percent characterized the level of difficulty in filling those jobs as “moderate” (55 percent) or “severe” (40 percent).

Women are Good for Manufacturing

Put simply, the problems related to the shortage of manufacturing workers cannot and should not be solved by focusing on only one half of our country's population. In the U.S. today, women earn more than half of all associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees. Women make up approximately 47 percent of the total American workforce and women are expected to account for 51 percent of the increase in total labor force growth through 2018. At the same time, women hold less than 30 percent of the jobs in manufacturing and only 6 percent of women in manufacturing have the title of CEO. In order to address the current and ever-widening skills gap in the manufacturing sector, employers need to get smarter about attracting women workers.

Bringing more women into manufacturing is not just about recruitment to fill jobs; it's also about retention and advancement. Women are needed throughout the sector, including at executive leadership levels. It is well documented that diversity is crucial to fostering creativity in the workplace. As manufacturing quickly evolves into an increasingly high-tech field, innovation in product design is critical for success. Studies by Forbes and others have examined the impact of diversity in leadership on challenging the workplace mold. The studies conclude that the combination



Melissa Struecker at Aluma.

of diverse experiences, perspective and backgrounds is crucial to workplace innovation and the development of new ideas.

Further, studies from top analytical groups including McKinsey & Company consistently demonstrate that having women at the top brings value to a company's bottom line. Assessments of global data show that companies with women and men in positions of senior leadership outperform companies managed by male-only teams on key financial metrics such as operating margin and market capitalization.

Everything from pure instinct to deep investigation tells us that more women leaders would be good for the manufacturing sector. So the question is: what's in it for them?

Manufacturing is Good for Women, Too

In 2014, Women in Manufacturing (WiM) released a survey co-produced with Plant Moran, an accounting and advisory firm. Among the survey's most important findings was that women working in the manufacturing sector today are pleased with their jobs and hold favorable opinions about manufacturing as a career path for women. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they would recommend manufacturing to other young women. The Manufacturing Institute and Deloitte found a similar result in 2013 among women working in manufacturing. The majority of women they surveyed reported being satisfied with their jobs and over half indicated that they would choose manufacturing again if they had the opportunity to begin their careers anew.

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But if women who are working in manufacturing today are pleased with their jobs, it's not clear that the next generation of women workers intends to follow in their currently contented footsteps. And if young women are not interested in manufacturing careers, there is little chance of them eventually earning positions of leadership in manufacturing companies.

The 2014 WiM survey also measured the opinions of young women who have not yet made decisions about their career paths. In the survey, young women pinpointed high earning potential as the most important aspect of their future career, followed closely by work that is interesting and challenging. When these results are juxtaposed with the perspectives of women currently working in manufacturing, a significant overlap emerges. Approximately 50 percent reported that good compensation is among the top benefits of the sector and more than 80 percent of women in manufacturing confirm that the field offers interesting and challenging work. These numbers demonstrate that the manufacturing sector is already offering the top attributes young women are looking for in their future careers.

However, in the same survey, less than 10 percent of young women selected manufacturing as one of the top five fields they feel offer the most opportunity for women. And nearly 70 percent indicated that they are unlikely to consider a job in manufacturing. By contrast, nearly 75 percent of women currently working in manufacturing believe that the sector does in fact offer multiple career opportunities for women and more than half of women in manufacturing today think that the sector is a leading industry for job growth for women.

So why the disparity? The answers may be in lack of role models. Half of women working in manufacturing noted that having very few, to no women currently in executive or management positions, is a primary obstacle. They also said that a lack of information about the sector is a major problem.

Bridging the Gap

Research is conclusive that women workers, and women leaders, are valuable assets in the corporate environment. And industry analyses demonstrate that the manufacturing sector in particular has a great deal to offer women employees, from



Jennifer Jones at Aluma.

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Melissa Struecker works on Line 6. In just five years at Aluma, she's grown to the position of Leader in her line.

high salaries to interesting work. But, it is also clear that many women remain woefully unaware of the many compelling and gratifying opportunities available to them in manufacturing. It is critical to bridge this gap not just to recruit women to careers in manufacturing, but also retain them and advance them into leadership roles. Developing a pipeline of women workers will enable them to achieve their own career goals and incorporate them into efforts to push the American manufacturing sector forward.

Since its founding in 2009, WiM has been single-mindedly committed to encouraging women to engage in manufacturing careers. Based on their experience, here are five concrete steps manufacturing industry employers can take today to bridge the information gap.

Be visible. At the 2014 WiM SUMMIT, attendees heard from Chandra Brown, the deputy assistant secretary for manufacturing for the U.S. Department of Commerce. Brown recalled a previous job in a manufacturing facility. She said, "I used to lead a lot of tours, especially when we had high schools come in. It doesn't matter if you have women when they are hidden." Brown's

remarks are a good reminder to consider women for assignments and positions where they are able to make recruitment connections and help to showcase a company's commitment to inclusion.

Be promotional. The best way to break down antiquated stereotypes about the "dirty, dark, and dangerous" world of manufacturing is to share information that defies them. From traditional press to social media, the resurgence of manufacturing and the open jobs in the sector are the talk of the town. Bearing in mind reasonable privacy and confidentiality precautions, take the opportunity to offer insight on new technologies, announce community partnerships, and describe the exciting activities happening in manufacturing. Give readers accessible venues to ask questions and learn more in order to capitalize on interest.

Be relatable. Significant bodies of research indicate that it is difficult to be what you can't see. Everyone can benefit from a mentor who helps to guide the way, and people who have a mentor at work very often outperform people who do not. Evidence suggests that this is true for women, and especially for women in STEM — Science, Technology, Engineering, and

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Math — careers. Manufacturing Industry survey data routinely suggests that informal mentoring programs are preferable to forced pairings. Companies that facilitate meaningful connections between junior and senior employees, or partner with organizations which foster connections within the sector, will reap benefits.

Be flexible. Offering a more flexible work schedule for employees benefits all workers, not just women. Shifting the focus away from hours worked to tasks completed is one strategy for maximizing efficiency and gaining employee buy-in. Reminding people that the company is committed to them — and respectful of their outside-of-work obligations — helps to increase commitment to the company and to the industry.

Be adaptable. One of the areas in which manufacturing companies always score high in industry polls is the opportunity for workers to gain new skills. Supporting programs like continuing education courses and certification classes is a valuable way to help employees achieve their education and career goals while exposing them to the emerging technologies that are changing the face of manufacturing. Allowing employees to seek out new skills and apply them in the workplace is a positive strategy for fostering innovation and producing growth. In addition, emerging research suggests that some employees, especially younger workers, thrive by understanding how their work fits into the larger objectives. Encouraging inclusive collaborative leadership and open communication can help build a productive working environment that is appealing to a wide variety of employees.

The year 2014 saw the iconic American car company, General Motors, name its first women CEO. In 2015, Mary Barra was also named the world's most powerful businesswoman in Forbes' annual list. With a woman in the driver's seat, GM is a part of the efforts to navigate the way forward for women in the manufacturing sector today and for young women who are considering their career options.



With the hard work of women like Leslie Wolf, Aluma produces at least 75 trailers a day.

When WiM interviewed Jessica Jeffery, a Senior Environmental Engineer at GM, for the Hear Her Story initiative, she said, "I would recommend a career in manufacturing. A career in manufacturing is fast-paced, challenging, well-paying, and rewarding." Together, we can take steps to spread the word about the benefits Jeffery and other women have found in manufacturing careers. When we accomplish this, we will help to develop a workforce that is better for manufacturing, a job sector that is better for women, and a thriving industry that is better for the U.S. economy.

About the Organization

For more information about the author or the Women in Manufacturing organization that is dedicated to supporting, promoting and inspiring women in the manufacturing industry, visit their website at www.womeninmanufacturing.org.

About the Photos

The photos featuring female employees at Aluma Trailers were taken by Olivia Lee, Aluma Trailers Marketing Manager. For more information about Aluma, visit their website at www.alumaklm.com or call (866) 415-3285. ■

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