

Industrial Shortage

By Tajma Hall | Posted: Mon 10:27 PM, Dec 11, 2017 | Updated: Mon 10:56 PM, Dec 11, 2017

EAU CLAIRE, Wis. (WEAU) – With a growing economy, unemployment rates are low and job availability is high, especially in manufacturing. This leaves an increasing amount of available jobs and not enough workers to fill them.



Wisconsin's employment rate for manufacturing positions is one of the highest in the country and the industry continues to see growth. "We have a very competitive market in the Chippewa Valley there are lots of really great employers that are all vying for the same resources which are the people," said Zachary Schmidtkecht, Vice President and General Manager at Great Northern Manufacturing in Chippewa Falls. Schmidtkecht says Great Northern is growing and is seeing a continued need for more employees.

Experts say low unemployment, Wisconsin's failure to attract college graduates, and an aging workforce are major issues in the industry. The labor shortage is expected to worsen as more from the baby boomer generation retire. While Great Northern has some job openings only requiring a high school education, many manufacturing positions require a higher level of experience.

"80% of companies are saying they can't find the talent that they need to keep their companies growing and being able to serve their customers," said Ann Franz, Director of the NEW Manufacturing Alliance.

Dr. Chuck Bomar, Dean of UW-Stout's STEM department says a declining number of high school graduates, coupled with not enough qualified college grads is a growing issue. "Between the growing economy and a shrinking high school work force ready to go to college to learn these skills, we're in the midst of a true shortage," says Dr. Bomar.

Plant tours, job shadowing, and mentoring can be helpful tools for exposure. While many school districts have career planning programs to introduce students to manufacturing and other industries in high school, some say the exposure needs to happen earlier.

"If we wait till students get to high school to start giving them options, we are so far behind the eight ball it's unbelievable. We really need to start with elementary, middle school kids. Start showing them, what are the career opportunities," said David Minor, President and CEO at the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce.

Minor says exposing students to careers in manufacturing is the answer to bridging the gap and could help to resolve the industry's labor shortage in future. Some current college students looking to get into manufacturing agree. "Getting students out and exploring possibilities earlier on could really help them develop a path so that they know more of what they want to do when they start," said Luca Jochim, Senior at UW-stout.

Minor says it's not just the school system's responsibility. "Now we need to follow up with Mom and Dad. We need to bring them into the community. We need to bring them into our manufacturing industries and our businesses so they can see what it's like. So they can understand that it is a good job and hardworking people."