



INSIGHT FROM ...

MARK KAISER, president of Lindquist Machine Corp.
and chairman of the board of directors for NEWMA

The continuing mission

A reflection on 10 years of the NEW Manufacturing Alliance

BACK IN THE LATE '90S AND early 2000s, the rise of off-shore, low-cost manufacturing really hit manufacturing hard. That drove a big change in manufacturing in the U.S. and in the region. You saw a lot less employment, and we had to reposition ourselves, which we did, in advanced manufacturing, in more custom applications that were lower in volume and more highly engineered.

With that radical change came a need for a different skill set in the workforce. We needed more technical skills because of the demands of advanced manufacturing. We also needed people with more training in soft skills, collaboration skills, conflict resolution skills and leadership skills — it's all the stuff we should have been doing but didn't until we were forced to do it.

Problem was, we couldn't find that skill set.

The people who lost their jobs back in the early 2000s either went into another career, or they went back to school to do something else and we didn't have them anymore. At the same time we were losing those positions, the training programs were leaving the school systems. They were under cost pressure to cut, and they cut things like technical education because those jobs were going away.

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are committed to come up with some creative solutions.

That was when everything changed.

In the 10 years since, we've made great progress. We are business guys, so we measure things. One of our key measurements was, can we see an increase in the level of students graduating from the tech colleges in high-demand fields where we couldn't find workers? There were 150 students in welding programs in the New North when we started. This year, there are more than 900, a six-fold increase. You see the same kind of numbers in the machining programs and in the mechanical assembly programs where we now have two and three times the enrollments you saw 10 years ago.

NEWMA has made a tremendous difference, but we still have work to do. We've changed the perception of manufacturing with students and educators, but we are still working on the parents. It's a more difficult challenge because we could get to the educators, but it's not so easy to get to parents. We need to convince parents to view a manufacturing career as success for their kids. Many still want their kids to go to a four-year college and get a college degree. But the numbers show that less than 50 percent of the kids who start at a four-year college achieve a four-year degree, and they're

usually far in debt when they do.

We have learned a lot along the way, and are still learning. Take the K-12 Partnership Awards. When we first had the discussion, I would have been happy to get 50 educators and manufacturers in the same room. The first year we had more than 200, and we sold it out this year. Conversely, in the beginning, we thought plant tours would really be the answer. If we could just show them, they would understand the changes and the opportunities. While the tours are great, they are also time-consuming, and you don't reach as many people as you would like.

We have more work to do. If you look at the demographics of Wisconsin, we've got a couple of things really working against us. We have an aging workforce, and over the course of the next 10 to 15 years, they are going to retire. And in huge numbers. Plus, you don't have population growth happening. We're already struggling with unemployment, which is under 4 percent, which is considered full employment. That's real trouble, potentially.

What I think that will force us to do as manufacturers is to take what we've done here and try to work collaboratively across the state of Wisconsin. It may not be exactly the way we've done it here because different areas are going to require different strategies. But at least take the same principles and philosophy and try that in different parts of the state.

Then, we must market Wisconsin. Some of this is happening already. But we've still only scratched the surface when it comes to attracting and growing our workforce. There are opportunities with veterans, with incarcerated people coming out — there are a bunch of opportunities we just haven't thought of yet.

Mark Kaiser is the president of Lindquist Machine Corp. and chairman of the board of directors for the NEW Manufacturing Alliance.