
The manufacturer's dilemma

By Erica Schlaikjer
Aug. 04, 2008

Five years ago, Isidro Molinar was working in the shipping and receiving department of Hydro-Components Research & Development Corp. in Streamwood, scheduling pickups and signing in materials the company used to make seals and bearings for earth movers, diggers and other machinery.

At \$11 an hour, it was a decent job for someone who had never gone to college. But Mr. Molinar, 28, born in Chicago to Mexican parents, wanted something more. So last October, after Hydro-Components was acquired by Denmark-based Trelleborg Sealing Solutions, he started taking technical courses ranging from a half-day session on leadership skills to a three-day seminar on international auditing standards through the Management Assn. of Illinois, a Downers Grove non-profit.

Seven months later, Mr. Molinar was promoted to finished-goods supervisor, in charge of ensuring quality standards and scheduling work for 15 employees. He now earns more than \$45,000 a year.

"If you want to move up the ladder, you've got to educate yourself," he says.

About 80% of Trelleborg's 110 employees are Hispanic. That's no surprise considering 22% of Hispanics in Illinois work in manufacturing, a higher percentage than any other ethnic group.

Despite concerns it's a dying sector — the number of manufacturing jobs in Illinois has dropped 26% since 1998 — companies such as Trelleborg are in desperate need of skilled workers like operators and technicians who oversee sophisticated machinery with computer-driven processes.

But technical training programs can be expensive. Mr. Molinar's seminars, for example, cost the company \$175 to \$750 each, plus hourly wage compensation. In the wake of a recent expansion, the company is struggling with the best way to train new workers.

"If we do not take care of this, we are hurting ourselves," says Kathleen Kebulis, Trelleborg's human resources director.

FILLING THE GAP

For suburban manufacturers looking to advance their workforces, community colleges may be the best bet. Elgin Community College, for example, offers training to 3,000 employees a year in subjects such as blueprint reading and lean manufacturing — how to increase productivity while maintaining quality. To offset training expenses, companies can apply for grants, such as those offered by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, which pays up to 50% of the cost.

Manufacturers closer to Chicago may have better luck with offerings from organizations such as the Instituto del Progreso Latino, a West Side educational center that runs programs such as ManufacturingWorks, which helps manufacturers identify skills gaps within their companies, then recruits and trains talent to fill the void. Since the program started in July 2005, it has placed nearly 1,500 people at 321 companies in the Chicago area. New hires earn an average hourly wage of \$12.58, and about 52% of them are Hispanic.

The non-profit also administers a training program in computerized numerical control, a standard coding system that directs the operations of machine tools such as drills and grinders, at the Humboldt Park Vocational Education Center of Wilbur Wright College. It's an important system to learn, considering it's used in almost all manufacturing processes.

"The fact is, Latinos are a growing percentage of the active workforce, so you can't afford to neglect them," says Juan Salgado, the organization's executive director. "They need some introduction to the technical side of manufacturing. If you can do that, you can move them from \$8 an hour to \$14 an hour, and move them to more progressive companies that are making investments that need to be made to thrive in today's marketplace."

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