

LEARNING SOLUTIONS WITH RESULTS

Training for Success: Breaking Down Barriers to Employment

Overcoming homelessness, language skills, basic education, disability, poverty and child care needs can be monumental tasks for a significant portion of America's job-seeking population.

But a growing number of organizations are working to alleviate such obstacles, while providing people with the necessary skills to land sustainable jobs and pursue meaningful careers. Such resources are especially important in the wake of the ongoing labor shortage and skills gap.

In 2021, Deloitte released a study warning that the United States could have as many as 2.1 million unfilled manufacturing jobs by 2030. And the industry's mood reflects Deloitte's findings. According to Xometry and Women in Manufacturing's "2023 Career Advancement in Manufacturing Report," 82% of manufacturing companies are experiencing a labor shortage. Moreover, about three-fourths of companies surveyed by the National Association of Manufacturers earlier this year cited the inability to attract and retain employees as their primary challenge.

Investing in Disinvested Communities

Jane Addams Resource Corp. (JARC) has a long history of community support. Named after pioneering activist Laura Jane Addams, a leader in the women's suffrage movement who co-founded Chicago's Hull House in 1889 to help immigrants, JARC provides free training classes and the critical support necessary to keep its graduates employed.

"Our mission is to ensure that people who work don't live in poverty, and we use the advanced manufacturing sector as a mechanism to basically transition people from poverty into the middle class because manufacturing has such a wealth of middle-skilled career pathways," says Regan Brewer, JARC's president.

JARC was founded in 1985 as an economic development agency in the Ravenswood Industrial Corridor on the north side of Chicago. The neighborhood has seen its share of manufacturing and economic turmoil.

"We lost about 7,000 manufacturing jobs from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, so losing that many manufacturing jobs in a very small space had a significant impact on the neighborhood," Brewer explains. "And that's the reason why our organization was founded—to try to keep the manufacturing sector here in Chicago."

The reality of these figures is felt in the communities JARC serves: 61,000 manufacturing jobs were posted in greater Chicago in 2017. This resulted in about 30,000 hires but left the remaining jobs unfilled, according to the organization.

"We're really focused on communities that have not been served or had really suffered from disinvestment and, quite frankly, policies that weren't there to necessarily serve the population that we're serving," Brewer confides. "We want to basically bring wealth back to those communities."

The emphasis is on underrepresented and underserved groups. "The continued patterns of disparate outcomes for people of color and women inform the agency's focus on social inclusion, including racial equity, gender equity, and LGBTQ+ equity," according to JARC's website.

At Your Service: Supporting Workers

JARC provides two main services. Its Careers in Manufacturing Programs provide job training and placement for unemployed adults, while the Business and Workforce Services segment designs and executes worker training for manufacturers and their employees.

"Our strategies involve a dual-customer approach. We equally value the job seeker or the worker, as well as the employer partner," Brewer says. "So, when we're working on programs and solutions, we're trying to tailor them to meet the needs of both sets of constituents."

Careers in Manufacturing provides training in CNC machining (20 weeks), welding (14 weeks), CNC press brake (10 weeks) and mechanical assembly (10 weeks). There is also a bridge program designed specifically for adults in need of remedial education in reading and math. Upon completion of a program, participants receive an industry-recognized credential such as the Certified Manufacturing Associate (CMfgA) certificate from Tooling-U SME, which provides classroom and online training support.

In addition to being an educational resource, JARC provides job referrals to local manufacturing companies. The success rate is extraordinary. Some 90% of JARC graduates are placed into full-time employment, according to the organization. Another benefit: Students have access to JARC's Financial Opportunity Center, which offers social services to families in need.

"We also provide a lot of support services for folks—financial education, one-on-one coaching, work readiness,

digital literacy skills, emergency cash support—just a variety of things to make sure that they can be successful and also that they're really ready to go to work when we're ready to place them into jobs," Brewer says. "So they've figured out 'What is their childcare situation going to look like, and what is the Plan B for that going to look like? How reliable is their transportation and do they need a backup for that?'"

A Path Forward

Not everyone's career is a straight line. Life and other circumstances can get in the way. But everyone deserves an opportunity, including second or third chances. Sometimes it's just a matter of building confidence and a strong foundation.

"When you're a convicted felon, that's the first thing they look at," confides Danny Hill, a JARC graduate who is now a CNC machinist/programmer. "But everybody is subject to change—just give me a chance. That's all some people want. Train us and let us show you what we can do, instead of prejudging us before we get there."

Before JARC, Hill faced atypical barriers to employment despite his work ethic and eagerness. "I was coming from a criminal background, practically begging for interviews," he acknowledges. "And once I got to the table with employers—they see gold teeth, they see tattoos and they see a muscular build. They instantly judge you. (But) the gold teeth and the tattoos are from the past. They don't dictate the content of my character or my work ethic."

Without access to a job that paid a living wage, a criminal background can be a downward spiral. "Some (people) come from jail with the intention of settling for any job, and they end up going back to the street because they aren't making enough money," Hill says. "And they're trying to do the right thing, but now the money isn't coming in, they've got pressure, they've got bills, and now it's a cycle."

"It takes a strong mindset to say, 'Hey, listen, this is a

tough time but let me go ahead and get this done, and I can get more money if I head in this direction.'"

What's Next?

Since its formation, JARC has helped thousands of job seekers achieve self-sustainability. It also has worked with hundreds of businesses to improve their competitiveness.

The organization has expanded into other areas of Chicago, as well as into Baltimore and Providence, R.I. But there is no interest in expansion for its own sake, Brewer stresses. Instead, the goal is to identify and concentrate on areas where JARC can be of the most service.

"We want to be at the intersection of labor market demand and in low-income communities," she says. "We want to make sure that people that are in these communities can access those jobs and retain those jobs."

Baltimore is a great example. While the city's manufacturing cluster is smaller than Chicago's,

JARC calls the concentration of middle-skilled jobs in the area "a rich source of good-paying jobs and career paths."

The program has already been a formula for success for Hill, who has been a machinist for nearly a decade, and earned each of the four certifications that JARC offers in machining. But he has even greater aspirations. While continuing to advance his training (he's working on a Mastercam certificate), Hill also advocates for more skilled trades training for next-generation workers.

Hill's ultimate goal is to open his own manufacturing shop. This will allow him to not only provide well for his family, but also introduce his three sons into the family business. They're already on the right path. Two are studying mechanical engineering: one at Widener University in Pennsylvania and another at Loyola University Maryland, while the third is pursuing his own certifications at JARC.

"There's money to be made in this trade, it's just not enough people know about it," Hill says. ➔



JARC alumni and CNC machinists, (l to r): Marco Brooks, Danny Hill, Randy Weaver and Travis Anthony.

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info@toolingu.com or 866.706.8665