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Human Capital

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Manufacturers must adapt to offer a more modern and flexible work environment.

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With the supplemental federal pandemic [unemployment benefits now ended](#) across the country, employers and lawmakers who favored the cut off are hoping their predictions come true: that ending the extra cash will drive those who have not returned to work will get back into the workforce.

But for much of the country—[half of all states](#)—those benefits have long been over, and we've yet to see a rush back to work. According to [July jobless numbers](#), unemployment is still in the neighborhood of 5% or above in much of the Southeast, where the extra benefits in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida and South Carolina all ended in June. In contrast, unemployment rates

have remained consistently low across the Midwest and North Midwest—states where jobless rates historically hover in the 2-4% range—suggesting the extra payments did little to disincentivize the workforce in the first place.

In manufacturing, the reality is that the labor shortage is nothing new—it's been an ongoing issue for years with companies struggling to fill roles as manufacturing jobs fell out of vogue in the shift toward so-called “knowledge work.” But as crippling student debt prompts many young people to reconsider skilled trades in lieu of college, manufacturers have a ripe opportunity to capture new talent.

In order to do so, manufacturers must move away from the old-school status quo and adapt to offer a more modern and flexible work environment—one that's attractive to a modern workforce. Here's how:

1) Offer flexible scheduling.

The pandemic has **disproportionately impacted women**, largely due to childcare issues. With schools and daycare centers closed or kids quarantined, women are more likely to be the ones to stay home. This makes it almost impossible for them to work a traditional eight-hour day or 40-hour week, and it puts employers in a pinch when those mothers need to off. Not to mention, perpetual short staffing means that six-10 shifts and mandatory OT are commonplace in the industry—a schedule many people simply cannot or will not work due to family obligations.

By adopting more flexible scheduling options, employers could attract more people who can show up for their scheduled shifts more often. Perhaps it's a four- or five-hour shift, three days a week or a rotating part-time schedule for some, in combination with a full-time schedule for those who prefer that option. We've also seen companies have great success with internships that allow college students to work a flexible schedule while going to school (some even offer tuition assistance) with the stipulation that students stay on as full-time employees for a specified period after graduation. Regardless of the structure, simply offering less rigid schedules can make a manufacturing job much more feasible and attractive.

2) Create a tech-savvy environment.

Part of the problem with attracting talent is that the manufacturing sector has an image problem. When people hear “factory,” they think repetitive, manual jobs in a dark and dirty environment.

Implementing **digital manufacturing technology** solves this problem in two-fold. First, it creates an environment that attracts tech-savvy people. Rather than manual labor, you need skilled individuals who can operate high-tech equipment, have at least a moderate understanding of KPIs and can learn to optimize processes, which could be much more appealing, especially for younger people. Second, by leveraging a digital standard of work, you can train people faster and more effectively in these exact skills. This broadens the scope of talent you can attract and helps you get them onboarded quicker, without impacting productivity.

3) Implement analytics.

Even with these strategies, you still may not have enough people. In that case, carefully examine your processes by looking at analytics data to see where you can make efficiency improvements.

For example, is task-performance-speed declining because of new processes? If so, you may need to conduct some supplemental training. If unemployment in one area is already low or people simply don't seem to want to come to work, could you shift production to an area where there's a deeper and more active talent pool?

By examining your production data, you can make adjustments based on real-time information, rather than trying to play catch-up.

In order for manufacturing to fully realize the promise of the "Factory of the Future," we must evolve our age-old employment models and processes to attract the employees of the future. By implementing modern, flexible scheduling and digital technology—and actively promoting these benefits, along with reasonable wages—companies can change their image to make manufacturing an attractive and lucrative career once again.



By **Shannon Gabriel**, Managing Director of **Leadership Solutions**, for **TBM Consulting Group** which includes **Dploy Solutions**. Shannon partners with clients to identify and resolve weaknesses within their organizational structure and hiring process, build bench strength, and engage our interim consultants to facilitate growth and drive immediate performance improvements.