Can Trump bolster Connecticut's manufacturing sector?

By **James Mosher** **November 11, 2016 - 3:49pm**

Market analysts and financial experts are dissecting President-elect Donald Trump's pending economic policies. | photo by Gage Skidmore/Creative Commons

While market analysts and financial experts try to forecast the economy under President-elect Donald Trump, a local manufacturing industry leader said a major accomplishment would be luring young people to the sector.

There are good-paying jobs in Connecticut plants but it's hard to get millennials interested in them, much less commit to them, Jerry Clupper, executive director of the Woodbridge-based New Haven Manufacturers Association, said in an interview with Crain's Connecticut.

"We still face shortages of the skills that are needed to replace our current workforce and accommodate the expansion occurring in many sectors," Clupper said. "Manufacturers will welcome all the help they can get to be more successful."

Clupper said members of the manufacturers association are pivoting amid another industrial revolution.

http://connecticut.crains.com/article/news/can-trump-bolster-connecticut%E2%80%99s-manufacturing-sector

The “Fourth Industrial Revolution” builds on that of the third, which was the electronics revolution that began in 1969, according to the World Economic Forum. The new iteration is “characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres,” wrote Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum.

“They are looking to the Fourth Industrial Revolution challenges and how to grow in that economy,” Clupper said of his members.

Trump’s business-friendly platform and pledges to lessen bureaucratic obstacles should help bring manufacturing jobs back to the United States, said Michael Chadwick, a certified financial planner who has offices in Unionville and Torrington.

Connecticut, which has struggled to attract and retain manufacturers, faces economic hurdles that will likely take years to clear, Chadwick said.

“It’s going to be a transformational time for the country,” said Chadwick, who runs Chadwick Financial Advisors. “The system is just too riddled with debt and excesses."

The Connecticut landscape

Efforts are already underway in Connecticut to draw more young people into manufacturing careers, starting with colleges and trade schools.

“Our members are always interested in reading about educational programs as they relate to manufacturing,” said Cyndi Zoldy, executive director of the Waterbury-based Smaller Manufacturers Association of Connecticut.

The Advanced Manufacturing Technology Centers program, which is run by the Connecticut community college system and offers certificates after 10 months of study, reports growing interest. Enrollment made a “significant bump” to 510 students for the fall semester, said Maribel La Luz, the community college system’s spokeswoman. More than 300 are already in the program with some having graduated in May while the others are scheduled to graduate in December.

Of the latest enrollments, Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield has the most at 244 with Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport second with 108. Outreach by the Connecticut Department of Labor to veterans and the underemployed is helping boost the number, La Luz said.

The fact that Stratford-based helicopter maker Sikorsky Aircraft has decided to remain in Connecticut has brought forth additional enthusiasm among students and job seekers, she said.

Sikorsky, along with East Hartford-based Pratt & Whitney, which makes jet engines, and Groton-based Electric Boat Corp., which makes submarines, joined with the state colleges in a manufacturing jobs challenge launched in May called "300 Jobs, 300 Days." The challenge seeks to pair students with available in-state jobs identified by the companies.

The road ahead

Regardless of who is in the White House, Connecticut's once mighty manufacturing sector faces a tough road. Manufacturing has gained 400 jobs in the past year as of September, an increase of 0.3 percent, according to Connecticut Department of Labor statistics. Yet the 159,600 jobs in the sector is down 28,400, or 15. 1 percent, from March 2008, which was before the recession.

Manufacturing's share of the Connecticut gross domestic product fell from more than 25 percent to less than 15 percent between 1980 and 2014, according to the Connecticut Commission for Economic Competitiveness.

The commission has not created a manufacturing subcommittee but members are engaged in efforts to help the sector, said Tom Spinella, the commission's spokesman.

The commission is focused on precision manufacturing, especially in the aerospace and defense industries, said state Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, the commission's co-chair. He praised commitments made by Electric Boat, Sikorsky, and Pratt & Whitney, which includes purchasing from local suppliers, upgrading plants and hiring.

“Manufacturing is a very bright spot for Connecticut; we need to step on the gas to accelerate this progress,” Tong said.

Tong spearheaded legislation that created The Connecticut 500 Project, which aims to create 500,000 private sector jobs over the next 25 years.

“(It) will forge a true partnership between business and public-sector leadership in this state,” he said in a press release following the legislation’s passage in May. “Together, Connecticut will reassert itself as one of the strongest economies in the nation and the world.”

Some manufacturers with far-flung operations still find some benefits to remaining in Connecticut. Killingly-based Rogers Corp., for example, announced in August the move of its corporate headquarters to Arizona, but spokeswoman Amy Kweder said that was not a prelude to moving its 300 manufacturing jobs out of state.

Even the largest manufacturers, those making headlines through huge contracts, face difficulties because of the changing workforce, said Jeanne Meister, a University of Connecticut graduate and co-author of the recently published book, “The Future Workplace Experience: 10 Rules for Mastering Disruption in Recruiting and Engaging Employees.”

“Manufacturing companies with longtime roots in Connecticut such as Pitney Bowes and United Technologies (parent company of Pratt & Whitney) face numerous disruptions in navigating the future workplace, from tapping multiple generations, to developing strategies for how to use smart technologies, machine learning and artificial intelligence on the plant floor, to preparing for an increase in contract or gig economy workers,” Meister wrote in an email.

Programs will have to be developed to pass knowledge from older generations of manufacturing workers to younger ones while maintaining efficiency, Meister said. As of last year, millennials born between 1982 and 1993 became the largest generational group in the workplace at 34 percent, Meister noted. By 2025, millennials and Generation Z (those born between 1996 and 2009) will be more than 60 percent of the workforce.

“This is the first time five generations will be working side by side in the workplace as traditionalists and baby boomers stay working as life expectancies increase and working adults either want to or need to work longer,” she said.