

PUGET SOUND CONSORTIUM FOR MANUFACTURING EXCELLENCE Industry, Community, and Women's Focus Groups ¹

Shelley L. Balanko, Ph.D.
January 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Puget Sound Consortium for Manufacturing Excellence (PSCME) is establishing a regional consortium to develop and implement programs and services providing Puget Sound industrial workers with the tools and techniques required for the competitive world of manufacturing. The PSCME works with local educational partners (e.g., our community college and technical college partners) to promote manufacturing training and career opportunities to students. Toward this end, the PSCME is developing recruitment and retention strategies to encourage a diverse workforce. The PSCME commissioned three focus groups to provide information for their recruitment and retention program development.

The focus groups were conducted with: 1) women re-entering the workforce who were attending a YWCA employment program, 2) parents involved in the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program, representing the general community, and 3) representatives from a variety of Puget Sound manufacturing industries. The groups varied in size (7-10), and participants were diverse with respect to age, race/ethnicity, and gender. The focus groups lasted 1-2 hours and addressed a variety of issues. The women's and parents' groups explored participants' perceptions of careers in manufacturing (e.g., stereotypes and areas of interest), barriers to pursuing these careers, and training opportunities. The industry representative group explored participants' expectations for the future of manufacturing and their attitudes, values, and ideas regarding the recruitment of women and diverse populations.

Participants in the women's and parents' groups reported that there is value in a career that goes beyond procuring money for survival. Careers, unlike jobs, can provide self-definition and personal fulfillment. When discussing manufacturing careers in particular, they were viewed both positively as a desirable career, and negatively as a "go nowhere" job. Both participant groups had little knowledge of, or experience with, the manufacturing industry, and consequently, many responses were based on negative stereotypes from North American culture as well as from exploitative labor practices in other countries. For instance, the manufacturing industry was associated with factories, hard labor, production, male-dominated workforces, regimented schedules, job insecurity, low pay, little opportunity for advancement, and biases against women and people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Participants expressed that their perceptions of manufacturing were dependent upon their exposure to the industry and their family employment history/values. More positively, management positions in manufacturing were regarded highly and were viewed as more financially and personally rewarding.

Participants identified many barriers to pursuing manufacturing careers such as a lack of knowledge about manufacturing industries and negative perceptions (e.g., stereotypes, frequent layoffs). Within the women's group, attention also focused on tangible barriers such as a lack of financial resources for training, childcare costs, transportation issues, and physical limitations (e.g., size, strength, age,

¹ Submitted as part of the evaluation of the Puget Sound Consortium for Manufacturing Excellence

disabilities). If a manufacturing career were to be pursued, both the women's group and the parents' group demonstrated a preference for upper-level positions and positions with many opportunities for advancement. A variety of manufacturing areas of interest were identified, with research and development common to both groups. Participants readily identified colleges, universities, and manufacturing companies as places to obtain training for manufacturing careers. On-the-job training and internships were considered very attractive training options. According to these participants, the cost and duration of training should be commensurate with income potential. Moreover, training facilities should be easily accessible (i.e., close to bus routes, provided online).

The industry representative focus group explored participants' thoughts on the future of manufacturing in Washington and qualities needed in future employees. First, there was some concern that lower level production may be at risk in this state, but technology skills required in assembly and manufacturing will be in demand. Consequently, the participants anticipate that manufacturing careers of the future will require individuals who are efficient, highly skilled, knowledgeable and experienced with computer technologies, and good communicators/team builders. Furthermore, future employees need to be flexible, life-long learners with competitive attitudes who are capable of big-picture thinking and problem solving. The industry representatives reported that there are many career paths available in manufacturing industries. Each path depends on an individual's desires and how each company encourages and develops its people. Presently, new employees are acquired from a variety of sources. Personnel are most frequently hired from college programs, the pool of temporary workers, former military personnel and from referrals by current employees. Participants felt there is no bias against women or people of diverse ethnic backgrounds in manufacturing industries. However, several other potential barriers to pursuing manufacturing careers were acknowledged including negative stereotypes, variable economic cycles, lack of public knowledge about the benefits of manufacturing careers, and poor marketing by the industry and educational institutions.

Based on the findings of the three focus groups, several recommendations were made. It was suggested that the manufacturing industry partner with educational institutions to provide financially feasible training opportunities such as internship programs. Marketing strategies need to be revised to dispel negative stereotypes and increase public knowledge of the benefits of manufacturing careers. Moreover, it was suggested that all recruitment and retention efforts should make a concerted effort to reach out to women and people of diverse ethnic backgrounds.