

Manufacturing Looking Up

by Dianne Lewis 07 March 2012—

Utah's manufacturing industry is expecting a better year than 2011, but companies are still facing labor shortages and tech colleges have an image issue with manufacturing education, according to industry experts at Utah Business magazine's roundtable Wednesday morning.

The economy is looking up, said Ragula Bhaskar, CEO of FatPipe Networks. Many people saw a drop in profits last year without realizing that drop was because businesses finally felt comfortable enough to make investments in the future.

While those at the roundtable all acknowledged that Utah is a great place to do business, several mentioned a labor shortage as one of the biggest problems they are dealing with.

Having a down housing market affects his business, said KC Ericksen, president and CEO of Orbit Irrigation Products, Inc. However, the other issue he faces is labor shortages, in both manufacturing and skilled labor.

Bhaskar said he has a similar problem and is struggling to fill jobs with qualified people, especially in engineering, sales and marketing. Increased labor costs are also a concern.

Some companies are taking innovative approaches to doing

business, and these approaches are having a positive affect on recruitment. Both Futura Industries and Blendtec have created onsite health clinics. Blendtec CEO Tom Dickson said he just hired 30 new people and had 5,000 applications last year, and the clinic is a good tool to attract employees.

The state government also needs to invest more in education and improving Utah's reputation, Bhaskar said. "Message bills" during the legislative session damage the state's reputation nationally and harm the ability of business to attract outside talent.

Putting money toward schools that educate manufacturers is key, said Todd Brightwell, Economic Development Corporation of Utah senior vice president. "The question is how is Utah going to keep that competitive advantage? And that I think has a lot to do with education and our investment in it."

Aside from more government investment in education, professional certificates and blue collar jobs have an image problem, said Kelle Stephens, Dixie Applied Technology College vice president. We're trying to break this crazy notion that manufacturing is 'not for my kid' and build an enthusiasm for manufacturing," she said.

The word needs to get out about the good career options available in manufacturing, said Tyler Kimball, Namify vice president of operations. He said kids in high school need to know they can go to school while they're still attending high school, graduate with a degree or certification, and start a career at 18.

Mity-Lite CEO and President John Dudash said many people also don't understand that a certification can lead to more. Blue and white collar jobs are seen as divergent paths, when in reality, blue collar jobs can easily lead to white collar ones if that is where the employee wants to go.

The manufacturing roundtable will appear in the April issue of Utah Business.

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