



Bureau of Labor Statistics/Christie Washam/MEDILL

Despite adding more jobs and hiring more people, positions remain vacant in the manufacturing industry.

Want a job? Try manufacturing

by [Christie Washam](#)

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Despite persistent high levels of unemployment, more than 225,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector continued to go unfilled in the U.S. during November. That was down 5,000 jobs, or 2 percent, from October, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Still, the number of manufacturing vacancies is up 6.7 percent from the same period last year.

In Illinois, 12.6 percent of the workforce is employed in manufacturing. Yet with an unemployment rate of nearly 10 percent, the question is why these jobs remain vacant.

A recent survey of CareerBuilder.com listings found openings in hundreds of Illinois-based skilled manufacturing positions. Caterpillar Inc. is looking to hire computer numerical control machinists, who operate the software-driven manufacturing equipment that produces its heavy machinery. The positions require one year of experience and pay \$17.29 per hour plus benefits. Another job posting at an Elgin-based company is looking for a welder with at least one year of experience and previous certification is preferred. The job pays \$15 per hour.

There's a misconception that jobs in the industry have all been outsourced, experts say, but those that have gone overseas are typically low-skilled work, not higher tech jobs. "It's T-shirts versus wind turbines," said Ingrid Goncalves, a spokeswoman for the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council.

Part of the equation is also a bad image. Many people still think of manufacturing as "dirty factory work," said Mark Denzler, the vice president of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. But the industry has gone through tremendous changes in the past 30 years with new technology throughout the production line—the products, the software and the machines used to make those products.

New industry jobs require more education and hands-on training, which can be hard to find because many high schools and community colleges tend to focus on broad liberal arts educations instead, Goncalves said.

Chicago Renaissance works with local manufacturers and communities to create educational programs for low-income residents to give them the skills necessary to fill the employment gap. It works with city community colleges, which offer accredited skills certifications. It also helped create the Austin Polytechnical High School on Chicago's West Side, which is a public high school focused on skills tailored to the manufacturing industry.

Illinois organizations say they are among the leaders in encouraging the overhaul of manufacturing education in the U.S.

"It really begins at the junior high level," Denzler said. That's where math and science test scores begin to slide, he said. Like the council, the association works with community colleges in Illinois to develop the right programs in areas such as welding and machining. "You can't flip on a switch," he said. "You need to have a pipeline.

Training takes time and with half of the skilled workers in the industry slated to retire in the next decade or so, creating the right educational programs now is more important than ever.

Denzler said his organization was encouraged by the increase in the number of jobs created in the industry, but that doesn't mean much if the jobs remain vacant.

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