

# Changing perceptions about manufacturing

By Karen Owens

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What do I want to be when I grow up? Changing perceptions about manufacturing

“A doctor, lawyer, Indian chief ...” so goes the old song children recite in kindergarten when they talk about what they want to be when they grow up. Talking about careers with young people is an important part of growing up and one that our state is taking more seriously as we strive to remain competitive in the ever-changing global economy.

Thanks to the creation of Personal Pathways to Success, our young people are being exposed to 16 different career clusters in hopes that by the end of eighth grade, they can decide on an area to focus their studies in high school and prepare for the workplace that awaits them upon completion of their education, whether that’s after high school, technical college or a four-year degree.

One of the 16 areas students are exploring is manufacturing and in today’s society, the sales job to encourage a career in manufacturing at first blush appears to be a tough one. Sadly, many of the people who have the biggest influence on our young people — parents and teachers — are not actively promoting manufacturing as a viable career choice and for our state’s continued economic prosperity that fact has got to change.

There are a number of misperceptions that seem to exist about manufacturing’s vitality in South Carolina: visions of manual labor and old assembly lines of the past; the threat of layoffs and outsourcing; a lack of exposure to the benefits of manufacturing innovation; and a general misunderstanding of what today’s modern manufacturing jobs entail.

Yet, we know that today’s advanced manufacturing requires people proficient in math and science, with good problem solving skills, and the ability to design, use, maintain and repair the sophisticated equipment that drives our competitive and productive manufacturing sector.

In South Carolina, manufacturing accounts for about 1/5 of our state’s gross domestic product, or roughly valued at \$26 billion. Nearly a quarter of a million

South Carolinians work for the almost 5,000 manufacturers operating in our state. And we export 97 percent of what we make to other countries around the world, providing financial stability to South Carolina companies during uncertain economic times at home.

If we're serious about raising per capita income and bettering our citizens' quality of life, we must have a strong manufacturing base. Today's manufacturing is highly automated, with sophisticated computer systems and highly trained workers who can design software programs, modify product specifications, and troubleshoot problems when systems go awry. Tech-savvy employees with creativity and motivation can enjoy successful and fulfilling careers in manufacturing, plus they can do well financially.

The Silver Crescent Foundation is passionate about our mission to encourage young people to pursue their studies in science, math, technology or engineering so they can become the manufacturing leaders of tomorrow. We're also dedicated to changing the perceptions the "gatekeepers" — teachers, parents, and career counselors — have about manufacturing's attractiveness as a career path.

On November 20th, the Pee Dee Regional Education Center is hosting a Manufacturing Career Fair for area educators and parents to learn about the new world of manufacturing. The event is being held at the Southeastern Institute of Manufacturing Technology (which is part of the Florence-Darlington Technical College campus) from 8:30 am to noon. Teachers, guidance counselors and career specialists will have the opportunity to interact with manufacturers from around the Pee Dee to learn what these companies make, talk about what skills are needed to work at their facilities, and discover why manufacturing is indeed a great career choice.

We are hopeful that after spending a few hours learning about today's modern world of manufacturing and its future workforce needs, more people in the region will begin talking seriously with young people about the benefits of a career in manufacturing!

To learn more about the Manufacturing Career Fair, please contact Cheryl Lewis at 843-661-8277 or [clewis@scpathways.org](mailto:clewis@scpathways.org) .

*Karen Owens is the president of the Silver Crescent Foundation, a non-profit organization committed to promoting manufacturing vitality and career opportunities in South Carolina. Visit the Foundation on the Web at <http://www.silvercrescentsc.org> for more information about its programs and how to get involved.*