BUSINESS

Manufacturers search for workers to sustain revival

By Michael Diamond and Alesha Williams Boyd
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NORTH BRUNSWICK, N.J. — North Brunswick-based manufacturer XPAK USA has developed machinery that can, among other things, help PepsiCo robotically bundle different flavors of Gatorade into one package.

The firm is taking off; sales in the first quarter are 10 times higher than they were in all of 2007. Who knows how much faster it could grow if it could find the skilled workers it needs to keep up with its expansion. "It seems like we are growing, it seems like the economy is coming along, which makes us very happy," owner Tami Minond said. "But it seems like a machinist is a rare bird in New Jersey."

The plight of XPAK shines a spotlight on the possibility that those who were once ready to write off the manufacturing sector in favor of other fields made a bad bet. Manufacturers "are coming back," said Meredith Aronson, director of the New Jersey Advanced Manufacturing Talent Network. "The companies I talk to are scared. Their orders are increasing, but they simply can't find the workers."

The situation calls for educators and employers to get creative, Aronson said, whether it is by sharing training costs or tapping into veterans who are returning home from war with the type of discipline, team building and modern skills that could translate to manufacturers.

Manufacturers have been a bright spot in the slow economic recovery by adding jobs, from February 2010 to February 2012, at a faster pace than the rest of the economy, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

As the industry sees growth, policymakers and educators are scrambling to train workers to fill a growing number of manufacturing jobs. But they are run-

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ning into hurdles, ranging from a generation of students who have been dissuaded from pursuing the field to the sheer cost of setting up training programs.

Companies such as Advanced Technology Services, headquartered in Peoria, Ill., benefit from the rush. In the last year alone, it's hired more than 1,000 workers, many of them military veterans, said Jim Hefti, vice president of human resources.

They're trained between 12 and 44 weeks and sent to maintain other companies' plants and their computer-controlled equipment across the country. ATS clients include Honeywell, Caterpillar and Eaton, Hefti said. He said the company sees the most need in states such as Illinois, Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia and other parts of the Southeast.

"I think that what has happened over the course of the last 10, 20 years is that manufacturing has been an industry outsourced overseas, and so a lot of families and parents aren't encouraging their kids to get into manufacturing," Hefti said. "Now you're seeing a resurgence, but you don't necessarily have the skill sets to fill the need."

From February 2011 to February 2012, South Carolina saw an increase of 28,000 jobs — about 9,500 of them in manufacturing. It's home to Boeing, BMW and Michelin plants.

"It used to be offshoring, sending work out of the country, but (manufacturing)'s starting to come back," said Lewis Gossett, president and CEO of the South Carolina Manufacturers Alliance.