

Business Times: Future looks brighter for skilled manufacturing jobs

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Iowa's manufacturers have a broad-based, tax-supported group to help them with everything from suppliers to greater efficiencies and how to predict economic trends.

It's the Iowa State University Center for Industrial Research and Service. With main offices in Howe Hall on the ISU campus and satellite offices in 11 other Iowa communities, CIRAS serves as financial analyst, human resources expert, production forecaster and employment recruiter for hundreds of Iowa companies.

Director Ron Cox had these responses to questions about manufacturing.

Q: Should manufacturing workers be thinking about more education?

A: You cannot leave high school (early) or just graduate and expect to earn \$25 per hour. To compete, you need ... higher skills to run the new kinds of machinery, to program multi-access computer numerical control machines, to be on LEAN manufacturing teams.

For companies like Electrolux and Maytag, with unionized long-term jobs, it's getting more difficult for them to compete with China, Mexico and India.

Q: Is manufacturing leaving the state?

A: No. our surveys show that in 90 rural Iowa counties, if you remove government jobs, one-fourth of the remaining jobs were still in manufacturing plants.

Q: What kinds of manufacturers are they?

A: We define manufacturers as

(companies that) make things you touch. If it's metals, petroleum, trees, corn and agricultural products ... these things are embedded in a lot of things you touch.

The jobs may not pay the best wage, but they typically pay health benefits.

Q: How has the recession affected Iowa manufacturing?

A: When there is a downturn, the people who lose their jobs first are on the plant floor. If I am an owner or manager, I keep my engineers, lawyers, accountants, plant superintendents. But until the economy improves, I lose the lower-wage, lower-educated employee, and as production comes back up, I hire them back.

Q: Are things getting better?

A: Our measurements show that we are not out of the woods, but things are stabilizing. And don't forget, employment always trails the (upward) trends. I may get more orders and be ready to hire, but in the meantime, I also may have figured out better and more efficient ways to do things, and all of the jobs don't come back.