



**PROMISING
RECRUITMENT
AND RETENTION
PRACTICES**

WINTER 2024



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1 Background

This report presents feedback from four Washington based manufacturing employers who have hired and supported the ongoing career development of participants connected to AJAC, a nonprofit organization founded in 2008 to provide apprenticeship training to Washington State's aerospace and advanced manufacturing industries. The companies varied greatly in size and products. The diversity of their products underscores the far-ranging contributions that manufacturing plays in the economy. Examples of services provided by these employers include mill and lathe work, sustainable forest products, full-service machinery, metal fabrication, precision cleaning and much more.

Each of the employers interviewed for this report saw AJAC as a vital resource for growing the pipeline of skilled manufacturing employees to and within their companies. One employer said, "There is no doubt that AJAC is helping to build the next generation of skilled manufacturing employees."

Each company had experience working with one or more of AJAC's three main program areas: registered apprenticeship for adult manufacturing workers, registered apprenticeships for high school students, and pre-apprenticeship training for people interested in developing foundational skills that will help them pursue a manufacturing job. One employer noted that AJAC helps students be better prepared for the future and lays the foundation for future entrants to the manufacturing workforce to "dream forward" and take steps to become more financially secure. Another employer said, "One of the people we have enrolled in apprenticeship says they want to start their own manufacturing company someday. Who knows - I may be seeking a job working for them in the future."




Employers underscored the importance of ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of qualified workers to meet consumer demand and address the attrition of older workers. One employer said, "If we don't appeal to young people, and convince them of the excitement and potential for making a living wage job that this industry offers, the whole economy will suffer."

2 Purpose of Report

AJAC routinely gathers and uses the feedback of employers to make improvements in service delivery. Employers interviewed for this report shared information about: (1) the strategies that manufacturing job applicants and workers may want to convey to show that they are interested in participating in upskilling activities; and (2) the promising coaching, advising, and retention strategies used by employers to support the career development aims and interests of new hires and incumbent workers. They also shared some ideas for promoting the work of AJAC and increasing the pool of manufacturing job applicants.

3 Characteristics of Successful Job Applicants and Workers

Employers identified distinctive characteristics, signs, and signals that they found desirable in manufacturing applicants and workers. One employer said, “As a larger employer we look for signals that people really have an interest in building their skills and advancing.” All said it was important that their workforce includes people from diverse cultural groups. Employers reported that it was important for job candidates and workers who desire to get ahead to convey and enthusiastically demonstrate that they are:













-  Ready to learn new skills, and willing occasionally to un-learn or re-learn skills, or adapt skills that they had gleaned in the classroom training to the company way of doing business.
-  Aware that as an employee in a manufacturing company they are part of a pipeline of people and goods that answer to different timelines and goals.
-  Able to answer questions about their career goals, and identify areas where they are skilled, or seek to build new skills.


- ☐ Cognizant of the effect that their mistakes could have on the company's bottom line and knowing that their efforts and attitudes influence all who work in the company.
- ☐ Ambitious, and willing to put in the time and work needed to advance.
- ☐ Acutely aware of the importance of safety protocols.
- ☐ Flexible and able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances that may require them to change tasks, shifts or work extra hours.
- ☐ Punctual and "drama free;"
- ☐ Fortright about what they want to learn or what they think would make their work more productive; and
- ☐ Show that they take criticism without being defensive and use it to make changes in their workplace practices.

4 Effective Coaching, Advising, and Retention Strategies

Employers shared some of the practices they used to increase worker motivation, job satisfaction and retention. They said these results are most likely to occur when employers:

- ☐ Are patient and give workers time to hone their skills.
- ☐ Do not throw new hires in the deep end, but rather find out whether, as one employer put it, they "want to zig or zag so we can customize their job placement, if possible."
- ☐ Let job applicants know what the job environment is like, and if it is a pressure cooker kind of environment, inform them so they can begin to assess their own comfort level, or ability to tolerate the environment.

-  Realize that younger workers have a different view of the role of work in their lives, and want to be informed, connected, and in the loop.
-  Demonstrate that they see the incremental skill gains that workers are making at school (as applicable) and at work.
-  Give workers pay increases soon after they are hired.
-  Let job candidates and workers know what it takes to get promoted in their company and to increase earnings.
-  Create an environment which encourages and expects peer-to-peer learning that is not based on positional authority or assigned roles, but instead is a standard workplace expectation.
-  Recognize that both apprentices and their formal and informal workplace mentors need and deserve recognition for their initiative, achievements, and contributions.
-  Do a crosswalk that looks at worker interests and skills to make the most optimal job placements, recognizing that this is easier to do in larger companies that have multiple career paths.
-  Encourage workers to ask questions, learn new tasks and cross train, whenever applicable.
-  Encourage workers to share innovative ideas and to listen respectfully to the pros and cons associated with these ideas.
-  Offer frequent check-ins, and “on the go” coaching or advising.
-  Take time to see what kind of learning styles workers have (social, tactile, audio, natural, solo, etc.) and make determinations based on that about how to support and assign them.
-  Accelerate people strategically, by giving them time to assess and hone skills, and to see where they want and envision their next step in the company.

 See beyond the individual and keep their eye on what staffing or administrative changes might be changing at their company, at AJAC, or at their K-16 education partners that could influence their partnership with AJAC. One said, “We all need to think of our partnership with AJAC as a system partnership because what is going on with one of our partners might affect the worker, or the way we work together.”

5 Employer Recommendations

Employers shared their reflections about communication, partnership building and recruitment.

One or more employers recommended that AJAC do the following:

Promote good employers to people engaged in AJAC programs:

One employer suggested that AJAC staff and K-16 guidance counselors partners describe the upskilling, coaching and advising supports that AJAC partner companies utilize.

Engage employers who partner with AJAC as legislative allies and advocates: Another employer said, “When you partner with AJAC you also become a potential agent for them to use to influence legislation, such as the waivers that allowed young people under 18 to use additional equipment, and take their skills to a higher level faster than if they had to wait until they are 18, and other special funding for manufacturing training and changes at the state and federal level.”

Encourage companies to engage with AJAC at a pace that works for the company: An employer working with youth apprentices said, “I tell other companies if you try hiring high school youth you do not have to take new students every year. You can take them every other year. I advised them to pace their engagement in a way that works for them.”



Continue efforts to recruit more women: All four employers wanted to recruit women to jobs in manufacturing and added that additional work is needed to increase the pool of women who hear about manufacturing jobs and have opportunities to see other women who have successfully entered and advanced in manufacturing careers.

Realize that periodic setbacks in hiring or advising are opportunities for re-evaluation: One employer said that they had their first hiccup when one of the K-12 students placed at their company was not prepared. They did not regard this as a deterrent to engagement with AJAC, but rather as an opportunity to re-evaluate and improve their selection and referral criteria with their K-12 partners.

Appeal to the parents/caregivers of young people: This employer noted that there is still resistance and misinformation about jobs in the manufacturing economy and that parents, as well as students, in the K-12 system need to be informed about these career opportunities.

Continue to emphasize the importance of essential soft skills: Two employers said that the main reasons people lose or leave jobs is because they lack good interpersonal skills, and do not have the mindset to work as a member of a team. One employer said, “The least successful workers we employ are the ones who think they know it all. No one likes that personality trait, whether at work, or in sports, or in any area of life. People who are closed minded do not do well at this company.”

6 Summary

Each of the four employers said that the partnership they had with AJAC was beneficial to individual workers, their workforce as a whole, and the larger universe of manufacturing companies. When asked how he would sum up his experience working with AJAC one employer replied, “AJAC plays an invaluable role in the community.”

A different employer who worked with adults who were engaged in AJAC apprenticeships said that the work her company did to support the recruitment and training of participants served through AJAC’s programs was worthwhile and doubled as a “priceless” advertisement tool for her company. Another employer said, “Of course, we hope that good workers will stay. But even if it turns out that the worker we train was basically using the experience in our company as a steppingstone to a different company, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am supporting the manufacturing workforce, and contributing to the positive word of mouth about the upskilling-focused environment we cultivate in our company.”

Two individuals who employed high school youth said that their experiences with AJAC were further evidence of the wonderful qualities that many young people bring to the workplace. These employers also reported that high school counselors seek and benefit from receiving information about youth apprenticeships. One said, “We let employers know that AJAC makes the project doable and easy for us to engage in. We tell people you do not have to reinvent the wheel. We show that the solutions to engaging more young people in manufacturing career opportunities are not that complicated. We do not talk about job shortages, but instead about career opportunities. Other employers and school districts are inspired when they learn what we are doing with high schools. Many want to explore how to have such a program in their community.”



Another employer said that he totally disagreed with the unfavorable views that he sometimes hears from others in the community about the low motivation and skills of today's youth. He said, "That is not my experience. The way I see it is if you create the environment for incumbent workers of all ages to succeed, they will be more likely to thrive, and your company will be more productive and profitable." A different employer said, "Because of AJAC the demographic of our workforce will likely begin to change because young people will be able to soak up knowledge and start to learn skills at a younger age." This employer was hopeful that the lost decade that some young people experience after leaving high school, often spending years moving in and out of different entry level jobs would be replaced as more would be pursuing opportunities in manufacturing. She said, "Manufacturing is an area where you don't have to have had an expensive education, but can still succeed, earn good pay and have opportunities to pursue many different types of career paths."

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