

Rebekah Kowalski

Vice President, Manpower Manufacturing

ManpowerGroup

According to Rebekah Kowalski, until companies start viewing talent as a renewable source, they will never fill labor shortages. The Vice President of Manpower Manufacturing and Client Workforce Solutions believes that rather than waiting for the right fit or the perfect employee to come along, employers should invest in training existing workers. For 17 years, Kowalski has worked for Manpower in various capacities on the issue she is most passionate about: placing people in the industries they want to join.

“By 2025, we’ll be short 2.5 million workers in manufacturing. That’s a function of demographics and individuals retiring. If you layer into that the skills required, the gap actually gets to be quite higher,” explained Kowalski. What does she say to employers who still want to hold out for the exact match? “The numbers just don’t allow for that.”

She knows the reason employers treat talent as a scarce resource is because for a long time they were right. For the last few decades, as productivity and efficiency increased, the introduction of new technologies meant that manufacturers needed the right person with the right skills to keep up. Now things have changed so much that manufacturers cannot find people to fill positions. “If you looked back a year and a half ago, the data said there was less than one person available for every open (manufacturing) job that we had in the U.S.,” she described. “Even if we took all the unemployed off of the sidelines and put them into these jobs, you would still be short talent. That talent has to be treated as a renewable resource. We can’t accept waste in the manufacturing world.”

Through the Path Training Program that she started at Manpower, existing employees receive training for a better job, while working in their existing job. The program is expected to train as many as 200,000 people by 2025. “That’s our commitment to helping renew that element for those new jobs that are coming up. If we don’t do it, it’s no different than any other resource that’s in short supply in the world,” she warned. “The social and economic implications are pretty mind blowing. So this is one thing we have to get right.”

Kowalski also believes that employers should prioritize looking for employees who are curious, rather than the perfect match. She has found that employees who are willing to ask questions tend to be the ones who take initiative, and they also are the ones eager to learn. Manpower created their own online test to measure the learnability of recruits. She encourages manufacturers to market a career path, a journey, and a mission to prospective employees, and not only a job. The hiring process should bring someone into a company’s story so that their initiative becomes part of the company’s story.

“If you’re not telling a clear story, and you’re not providing space for people to provide their recommendations and take initiative, you’re missing it,” Kowalski explained. “This is a leader-led behavior.”



Everyone from the first line supervisors on up should be inviting people to participate on what it is you're building together. That's of critical importance."

Increasing diversity in manufacturing companies fails when placing people of color in companies is not done in tandem with ensuring that there is a support system in place for those new employees to thrive. If the culture is not one of inclusion, those new employees will get frustrated and leave. To reduce the likelihood of such outcomes, Manpower does internal surveys on every company they recruit for to determine if they are suitable workplaces in which to send employees of color. "Our market managers are the ones that have the responsibility to go in and validate that a workplace is safe for an individual before they make a placement," explained Kowalski.

When she looks at the current state of the workplace during the pandemic, she has noticed a change in public opinion that could benefit both employees and employers. She refers to a January 2021 Wall Street Journal article that talked about public trust shifting away from media and government during the pandemic and to the employer.

"The employer stepped in on COVID, stepped in on social justice, and stepped in on wages, because there wasn't clear guidance coming from anywhere else, and they still had to run their business," she said. "So this is actually a good news story for employers. You (employers) have this trust for some period of time. One of the best things you can do with it is demonstrate how you will help people walk up to that next set of skills that they'll need because you're bringing new technology into your manufacturing plant."