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NJMEP

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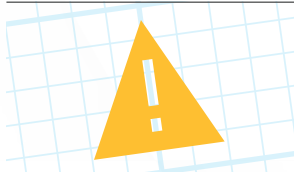
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MANUFACTURING MATTERS

New Jersey's manufacturing magazine, sharing the voice of the industry. Find the latest updates, resources, and trends shaping manufacturing and hear from the thought leaders driving the industry forward.



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2024: A Year of Growth, Collaboration, and Impact




Peter Connolly
CEO | NJMEP

As we look back on 2024, it is clear that it was a year of transformation and forward momentum for NJMEP and the manufacturing community across New Jersey. Guided by a commitment to addressing industry challenges head-on, NJMEP approached 2024 with ambitious goals: strengthening workforce development, building meaningful partnerships, and ensuring that manufacturing remains a cornerstone of the state's economy. It marked a period of extraordinary progress, with each initiative reinforcing NJMEP's unwavering dedication to the manufacturing community. Here's a look back at the highlights of 2024 and a glimpse into what lies ahead.

Building Bridges and Strengthening Foundations in New Jersey Manufacturing

In 2024, NJMEP focused on expanding its reach to better serve New Jersey's diverse manufacturing landscape, with a strategic emphasis on South Jersey. Historically overlooked in state-level industrial development, South Jersey holds immense untapped potential, including its proximity to key transportation hubs and its robust community of small and medium-sized manufacturers. To address this opportunity, NJMEP established a new office at Rowan Technology Park—a critical step toward fostering local connections, providing direct support, and enabling manufacturers in this region to tap into the full suite of NJMEP's services. This move not only solidifies NJMEP's presence in South Jersey but also reinforces its mission to create equity in manufacturing resources across the state.

Strengthening supply chain transparency was another defining focus of the year. By providing manufacturers with the tools and insights to better understand their supply chains, NJMEP helped clients



identify risks, optimize processes, and strengthen relationships with suppliers. These efforts not only improved operational efficiency but also positioned New Jersey manufacturers as reliable contributors to the nation's broader supply chain infrastructure.

A standout moment of the year was NJMEP's support for the commissioning of the USS New Jersey Fast Attack Submarine. This remarkable milestone underscored the vital role New Jersey manufacturers play in national defense. From advanced materials to precision engineering, the state's manufacturing community made a lasting impact on this project, reflecting its capability to support initiatives of both state and national importance.

Workforce Development: Building a Stronger Manufacturing Talent Pipeline

In 2024, NJMEP introduced transformative training resources that reflect its commitment to empowering manufacturers and their workforce with the tools and skills needed to thrive in a competitive, technology-driven landscape.

Bridging the Skills Gap

This year marked the opening of NJMEP's Hands-On Workforce Training Center, a cutting-edge facility located in the Cedar Knolls office that's designed to address the manufacturing skills gap. Outfitted with advanced manufacturing technologies—including CNC machines, robotic systems, 3D printers, and augmented reality welding simulators—and conventional tools like lathes, drill presses, measuring

equipment and more, the center provides participants with hands-on experience that directly mirrors real-world manufacturing environments. For businesses, this means having easy access to upskill their current employees and tap into a pipeline of job-ready talent, ensuring productivity and competitiveness in a global market.

Complementing this, in collaboration with Universal Robots, NJMEP became New Jersey's first Authorized Training Partner in the Universal Robots Training Academy network. This initiative has made cutting-edge robotics training accessible to manufacturers across the state. The academy focuses on equipping workers with practical skills in collaborative robotics (cobots), such as programming, troubleshooting, and integration. Unlike traditional robotics, cobots are designed to assist, not replace, human workers. Through hands-on training sessions, the academy teaches manufacturers how to program, operate, and integrate cobots into their processes, enabling them to reduce costs, improve production quality, and scale their businesses.

Makers and Creators: Inspiring the Next Generation

The Future Makers & Creators Tour developed in partnership with NJEDA and NJMEP is a groundbreaking initiative designed to educate and inspire students about the evolving field of modern manufacturing. On a mission to bridge the gap between education and industry, the tour featured hands-on experiences with advanced manufacturing technologies and introduces these students to local

manufacturers which could be their future employers.

At the heart of this initiative was the Mobile Training Lab, which made its debut this year. Fully equipped with advanced manufacturing tools, the mobile classroom delivered state-of-the-art manufacturing training directly to students.

Throughout 2024, the tour reached and inspired students at schools across New Jersey, including Piscataway High School in Middlesex County, Plainfield High School in Union County, Orange High School in Essex County, Camden High School in Camden County, iLearn High School in Bergen County, and Passaic High School in Passaic County. At each stop, students had the opportunity to interact with local manufacturers, gaining firsthand insights into the industry and the various career paths it offers.

NJDMCC: Supporting Veterans and Building Defense Capabilities

This year the New Jersey Defense Manufacturing Community Consortium (NJDMCC) demonstrated its profound impact on both individuals and the manufacturing sector by aligning veteran talent with defense manufacturing needs. This initiative not only addressed critical workforce gaps but also bolstered the resilience and capacity of the Department of Defense (DoD) supply chain.

The NJDMCC placed a significant emphasis on creating opportunities for veterans, ensuring they could transition seamlessly into the manufacturing industry. Over 200 veterans received training, nationally recognized certifications, and have access to placement support into New Jersey's

thriving manufacturing workforce. These efforts not only provided veterans with fulfilling and stable careers but also brought a wealth of discipline, expertise, and leadership to the companies they joined.

The NJDMCC is also working to empower nearly 100 manufacturers, providing them with the tools, guidance, and connections needed to navigate the complexities of the DoD supply chain. For existing suppliers, it is providing strategies to expand current government contracts and improve operational efficiency.

Together, the NJDMCC, manufacturers, and veterans are creating a stronger, more integrated manufacturing ecosystem in New Jersey.

Partnerships: Strengthening Collaboration Across New Jersey and Beyond

The past year also expanded and deepened its partnerships, working closely with organizations that share the mission to support manufacturers, strengthen the workforce, and enhance economic development.

Collaborating with DVIRC to Support the Submarine Industrial Base

NJMEP's partnership with the Delaware Valley Industrial Resource Center (DVIRC), Philadelphia's Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP), exemplifies how cross-regional collaboration can address national priorities. Together, these organizations have supported efforts to enhance the Submarine Industrial Base, a critical component of the Department of Defense supply chain. By pooling expertise and resources, NJMEP and

DVIRC are helping manufacturers meet the rigorous standards of this specialized sector while positioning New Jersey and Pennsylvania businesses as key contributors to U.S. defense capabilities.

Extending Partnership with NJBIA to Elevate Manufacturing Advocacy

A key milestone in the collaboration between NJMEP and the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA) was the transition of hosting responsibilities for the State-of-the-State of Manufacturing Summit to NJBIA. Held at the State House, this influential event has become a cornerstone for highlighting the opportunities and challenges shaping New Jersey's manufacturing sector.

NJBIA's leadership of the summit reinforced the impact of manufacturing advocacy at the highest levels, ensuring that New Jersey manufacturers have a strong presence in policy conversations that shape the state's economic future. Through this collaborative approach, NJMEP and NJBIA have established a stronger platform for driving meaningful change. Together, the organizations continue to demonstrate the power of partnerships in elevating manufacturing's role as a cornerstone of New Jersey's economy.

Partnering with Junior Achievement to Inspire Young Innovators

This year marked an exciting new chapter in NJMEP's partnership with Junior Achievement (JA) as the organization proudly unveiled its very own storefront in JA BizTown, an interactive learning environment

that introduces students to the world of business and careers. This collaboration represents NJMEP's commitment to bridging the gap between education and industry by providing young learners with direct exposure to manufacturing's vital role in the economy. The NJMEP storefront offers students a hands-on experience where they can explore manufacturing and business functions in a realistic, simulated setting.

Programs like JA BizTown play a crucial role in addressing one of manufacturing's biggest challenges: creating a robust pipeline of future talent. Beyond education, this partnership with Junior Achievement is about inspiring the next generation to explore their potential within manufacturing and cultivating a new wave of skilled professionals who will shape the industry's future.

Celebrating Community and Impact Through Events

2024's events highlighted the strength, resilience, and forward momentum of New Jersey's manufacturing sector. These gatherings went beyond traditional celebrations—they became platforms for connection, collaboration, and action.

'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day: A Milestone for Industry Impact

The 12th Annual 'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day set a new standard for celebrating New Jersey's manufacturing community. As the largest event in its history, it brought together manufacturers, students, and industry leaders to spotlight the immense contributions of the sector

to the state's economy and future. The event served as a powerful platform for fostering connections, sharing innovative ideas, and inspiring the next generation to pursue careers in manufacturing. Manufacturers shared their expertise, students engaged with cutting-edge technologies, and leaders exchanged strategies to tackle industry challenges. The event reaffirmed New Jersey's position as a hub of manufacturing innovation and collaboration.

Looking ahead to the 13th Annual 'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day, NJMEP is eager to build on this momentum. With even more opportunities to connect, innovate, and inspire, the event promises to drive the industry forward and celebrate the

achievements of every important player in the sector.

Looking Ahead to 2025: Building on a Year of Success

As we close the chapter on an extraordinary 2024, NJMEP reflects on the achievements that have strengthened New Jersey's manufacturing community and shaped its future. From empowering the workforce and fostering collaboration to celebrating innovation and inclusivity, this year has set a high bar.

Looking forward to 2025, NJMEP remains committed to driving even greater impact—expanding initiatives, deepening partnerships, and inspiring progress across the industry. Together, we will continue to innovate, collaborate, and elevate manufacturing in the Garden

State. Here's to another year of success and opportunity!

Want to be part of this exciting journey?

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New Jersey manufacturing is **Built to Last**.
Come discover some of the featured manufacturers
in this edition of *Manufacturing Matters*.

SWEMCO, Electro Product Management & GEMCO



SWEMCO

For nearly 60 years, SWEMCO has built a legacy of precision, quality, and innovation in electronics manufacturing. What started as a small family business has grown into a trusted provider of high-complexity electronic assemblies for industries where reliability is non-negotiable. But SWEMCO's success isn't just about technology—it's about the people behind the process. From leadership to the production floor, the company thrives on a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring its workforce is always equipped to meet the highest industry standards.

As SWEMCO continued to grow, so did the complexity of maintaining the certifications and quality standards that set them apart. Yet, balancing these critical training requirements with the daily pressures of a high-paced production floor was no small feat. Every moment spent in training had to be carefully managed to avoid disruptions while still equipping employees with the expertise needed to uphold SWEMCO's reputation for excellence. To navigate this challenge, SWEMCO turned to NJMEP for a structured, flexible training solution. Turn to page [7] to see how this investment not only reinforced their certifications but also delivered measurable business impact.

Electro Product Management

In the high-stakes world of aerospace and defense, trust isn't just earned—it's secured. For over 20 years, Electro Product Management (EPM) has provided precision electronic component testing to industries where reliability is non-negotiable. As a family-owned business, EPM has built its reputation on expertise, close client relationships, and a commitment to staying ahead of industry demands. But as cybersecurity requirements grew stricter, maintaining that trust meant proving their ability to safeguard sensitive data and systems.

With new regulations tightening across the defense sector, meeting compliance standards like NIST SP800-171 became more than just a competitive advantage—it was necessary for survival. The challenge? Understanding and implementing a complex cybersecurity framework while keeping daily operations running smoothly. For a small, tight-knit team, balancing security upgrades with business continuity required the right approach and a knowledgeable partner to guide them through the process. That's where NJMEP stepped in. Flip to page [8] to see how this strategic investment in cybersecurity not only safeguarded EPM's future but also positioned them for continued success in the industry.

GEMCO

For over a century, GEMCO has stood as a testament to innovation and craftsmanship in manufacturing. Founded in 1916 by an inventor whose breakthroughs revolutionized blending and drying technology, the company continues to push boundaries while staying true to its family-driven roots. Under the leadership of Casey Muench Bickhardt, GEMCO has expanded its impact across nearly 40 industries, blending tradition with modern expertise to remain a trusted leader in precision-engineered solutions.

As client expectations evolved, so did the need for more structured project management capabilities. In industries where precision and efficiency are paramount, achieving Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification became a crucial step in demonstrating GEMCO's commitment to excellence. However, balancing certification training with the demands of a thriving manufacturing operation presented a challenge. GEMCO needed a solution that was tailored to its needs—one that would equip its team with the right skills while allowing them to maintain their momentum. By partnering with NJMEP, GEMCO looked to find the support it needed to streamline the certification process. Turn to page [10] to explore how this investment in workforce development translated into tangible business growth.

New Jersey manufacturing is Built to Last. These businesses and the employees that make it all possible are truly, 'Unsung Heroes.'

Check back in *Manufacturing Matters* every quarter to see the Built to Last manufacturing list.
To be included, contact Mike Womack at mwomack@njmep.org and show the world your company is Built to Last.

Balancing Productivity and Progress: SWEMCO's Certification Triumph



SUCCESS STORY:
**OPERATIONAL
EXCELLENCE**

Background

Founded in 1965, SWEMCO has grown from a small family business into a leading electronics manufacturing service provider, all while staying true to its roots. Spanning three generations, the company's legacy is built on a foundation of quality, innovation, and a deep commitment to its team members and customers. Headquartered in Moorestown, New Jersey, SWEMCO specializes in high-complexity electronic assemblies for industries like defense, aerospace, and telecommunications. However, its success isn't just measured by its cutting-edge technology or industry partnerships—it's also about the people who bring it all to life.

Take Jacob Brickley, SWEMCO's Continuous Improvement Manager, as an example. A Navy veteran, Jacob joined the company 12 years ago with plans to work while figuring out his next steps in higher education. His journey broke the mold of the traditional "high school-to-college" pathway, proving that success doesn't rely on fitting a one-size-fits-all narrative. Today, Jacob is a vital leader at SWEMCO, driving operational excellence and embodying the values that make the company exceptional. By blending family-driven leadership with a focus on innovation and workforce development, SWEMCO continues to set the standard in the electronics manufacturing industry.

Challenge

For SWEMCO, maintaining its competitive edge in the fast-paced electronics manufacturing industry required constant adaptation and improvement. Certifications were critical—not just as a badge of compliance but as a way to ensure their workforce had the skills needed to meet the rigorous demands of their clients in the aerospace, defense, medical device, and telecommunication sectors. In SWEMCO's case, achieving and maintaining certifications like AS 9100 (Aerospace Manufacturing Certification) and ISO 13485 (Medical Device Manufacturing Certification) was critical to their success. Maintaining these certifications is crucial for meeting industry requirements. Employees on the production floor must also be aligned with their stringent quality protocols.

Balancing the training requirements with the daily demands of a bustling production floor adds another layer of complexity to renewing and maintaining certifications. Every hour spent in training was an hour away from fulfilling customer orders—a delicate balancing act that required careful planning and a seamless system to avoid costly disruptions.

Without a proper strategy in place and an accommodating partner, the risk of inefficiencies, employee burnout, or missed opportunities loomed. SWEMCO needed a solution that could streamline the certification process while preserving the productivity and focus required to keep their operations running smoothly.

FLIP ►

"Working with the different training resources we get from [NJMEP] we've been able to work with one of your representatives for proper scheduling; from planning it throughout the year, setting a complete schedule, and getting our team trained up,"

Jacob Brickley, Continuous Improvement Manager, SWEMCO

Solution

To help navigate the complexities of certification while maintaining productivity, SWEMCO turned to NJMEP to provide a tailored solution that prioritized flexibility and efficiency. Recognizing the need to minimize disruptions on the production floor, NJMEP worked closely with SWEMCO to create a structured training program that aligned with their operational schedule. NJMEP provided a total of 144 hours of training over 18 days. Training included Principles of Lean Manufacturing, critical training that upskilled employees on the standards involved in the IPC-610 certification as well as training on IPC-J-STD-001 standards. The organization was supported throughout its IPC-J-STD-001 and IPC-610 recertification. Beyond these certifications, SWEMCO brought NJMEP in to provide First Aid/CPR and Fire Extinguisher/Firefighting training to improve employee safety and security.

NJMEP's proactive guidance ensured SWEMCO could juggle both certification and production priorities without compromise, positioning the company for sustained growth in aerospace, medical, and other high-stakes industries.

Results

The impact of this partnership over the past 12 months extended far beyond certifications. According to an independent third-party survey, SWEMCO reported the following results:

- ✓ **INCREASED SALES: \$4,000,000**
- ✓ **RETAINED SALES: \$15,000,000**
- ✓ **EMPLOYEES RETAINED: 40**
- ✓ **COST SAVINGS: \$60,000**
- ✓ **NEW PLANT EQUIPMENT INVESTMENTS: \$450,000**

Securing Defense Contracts: EPM's Journey to Cybersecurity Compliance

Background

Electro Product Management (EPM) is a family-owned electronic component test lab that has been a trusted partner in the technology and defense sectors for over 23 years. Founded in 2001 by Ray D'Alessandro after selling his previous company, EPM has grown into a close-knit team of about 20 employees. The company thrives on its culture of loyalty and collaboration, with many team members having been part of the EPM family for years.

Specializing in delivering tailored solutions to high-stakes industries like aerospace, military & defense, and industrial, EPM works closely with top-tier manufacturers to meet the precise needs of their clients. Their expertise and dedication have earned them a strong reputation, particularly in the defense sector, where precision, reliability, and compliance are non-negotiable. Based in Fairfield, New Jersey, EPM continues to bridge the gap between cutting-edge technology and the demands of industries that require the highest standards.

Challenge

For Electro Product Management, staying ahead in the competitive defense sector meant meeting increasingly stringent cybersecurity requirements. With most of their defense clients now mandating NIST SP800-171 compliance for both new contracts and continued business, it was clear that achieving this standard wasn't optional—it was essential.

As a small, family-run business built on trust and transparency, EPM needed a partner who shared their values and could provide clear, actionable guidance. Navigating the complex framework of NIST SP800-171 posed significant challenges, from understanding the intricate security requirements to implementing them without disrupting daily operations.

EPM's close-knit team was fully committed to taking on the task, but they knew they couldn't do it alone. They needed a partner who could simplify the process, provide expert support, and help them meet the high expectations of their



SUCCESS STORY: OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

defense clients without compromising the personal touch that defines their business.

Solution

To meet the demands of their defense clients and achieve NIST SP800-171 compliance, EPM partnered with NJMEP for specialized support. While EPM sometimes relies on independent contractors for specialty work, navigating the intricacies of cybersecurity compliance required a trusted partner with the right expertise. NJMEP's team provided the guidance EPM needed, breaking down the complexities of the compliance process into manageable steps and tailoring their recommendations to EPM's unique operational needs. The project was structured into 5 dedicated workdays spread across the year, delivered quarterly, for a total of 40 hours. This strategic approach ensured that NJMEP could provide consistent, focused support while minimizing disruption to EPM's operations.

Key areas of focus included conducting a Risk Review Assessment, where NJMEP helped EPM periodically evaluate risks to organizational operations and assets, ensuring ongoing protection against potential vulnerabilities. NJMEP also implemented role-based IT security training, conducted biannually, to equip EPM's team with the knowledge needed to maintain a secure and compliant environment.

"NJMEP has been very helpful in obtaining the NIST 800-171 compliance, which most of my defense customers have been requesting in addition to the SPRS score," said Ray D'Alessandro, VP of Engineering.

Through these targeted practices and NJMEP's tailored approach, EPM efficiently met compliance requirements and strengthened its reputation as a trusted, secure partner for its defense clients. This partnership not only simplified the compliance process but also provided long-term value by enhancing EPM's cybersecurity framework and readiness.

Results

The partnership with NJMEP delivered transformative results for EPM, positioning them as a more secure and competitive supplier in the defense industry. According to an independent third-party survey, Electro Product Management achieved the following:

- ✓ **INCREASED SALES: \$500,000**
- ✓ **EMPLOYEES RETAINED: 20**
- ✓ **NEW PLANT EQUIPMENT INVESTMENTS: \$100,000**

"Oftentimes, working with other vendors can be challenging, but in this case, everything went very well and smoothly. The interface with NJMEP was great."

Ray D'Alessandro, VP of Engineering, Electro Product Management

Blending Tradition with Modern Expertise: GEMCO's Certification Journey

Background

GEMCO, short for General Equipment Manufacturing Company, is the embodiment of family legacy and innovation. Founded in 1916 by John Muench Sr.—an inventor who revolutionized blending and drying equipment with the creation of the double cone blender and double cone vacuum dryer—GEMCO's history is one of pioneering breakthroughs. Today, the company remains family-owned, with Casey Muench Bickhardt at the helm as CEO, continuing the tradition of excellence while carving her own path.

Casey's leadership journey began humbly; she began learning the business from the ground up. Through perseverance and determination, she navigated complex audits, refined operations, and scaled the company into a thriving enterprise. GEMCO now serves nearly 40 different industries, from pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals to powdered metals, chemicals, cosmetics, and beyond. This commitment to innovation and adaptability has solidified GEMCO as a trusted leader in blending and drying technology.

Headquartered in Middlesex, New Jersey, GEMCO continues to blend tradition with modernity, leveraging decades of experience to meet evolving market demands and deliver precision-engineered solutions that empower their clients to succeed.

Challenge

As a family-owned business rooted in innovation, GEMCO faced a pressing challenge: meeting the growing demands of its clients while maintaining its reputation for excellence. The PMP® (Project Management Professional) certification emerged as a pivotal requirement, not just as a credential but as a stepping-stone to growth. Clients increasingly sought reassurance that their projects were managed with the precision and expertise that only certified professionals could provide. For GEMCO, achieving this certification was key to maintaining competitiveness and unlocking opportunities across their diverse client base.

The demand for project management expertise was clear, but the path to certification required a reliable partner who could deliver training tailored to their specific needs. GEMCO sought a solution that not only aligned with their operational realities but also addressed the unique challenges of their industry. They needed a program that went beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, providing hands-on guidance and practical knowledge their team could immediately apply.

Recognizing the importance of this investment, Casey Bickhardt, GEMCO's CEO, set out to find a resource capable of delivering not just training, but a tailored approach that would empower her team to thrive in a demanding industry.

“If we didn't have the customization of the training that NJMEP provides with the flexibility of NJMEP's instructors and the knowledge and industry intelligence of their instructors, GEMCO wouldn't be as advanced and competitive,”

Casey Muench Bickhardt, CEO, GEMCO



SUCCESS STORY: OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Solution

To tackle the challenge head-on, GEMCO partnered with NJMEP, a trusted resource for manufacturers navigating complex certification processes. NJMEP provided the support and expertise GEMCO needed to streamline the path to PMP® certification, offering their PMP® Certification Exam Prep Course which totaled 48 hours of training over 6 days. The comprehensive training covered essential project management principles, from realistic planning and progress tracking to effectively managing stakeholder expectations and ensuring timely completion of deliverables.

"We're not reinventing a wheel; we're leveraging resources from NJMEP who've already done it before," said Casey Bickhardt, GEMCO's CEO. "Your instructors were super valuable to us in obtaining the certifications that our clients were asking for."

The training program took the weight off GEMCO's shoulders, providing guidance at every step and ensuring their team felt confident and prepared. NJMEP's expert instructors broke down complex concepts into actionable strategies, empowering GEMCO to not only secure the certification on their own terms but also maximize its value within their client base. This collaborative approach allowed GEMCO to meet industry demands while continuing to focus on delivering the exceptional service their clients had come to expect.

Results

Over the past 12 months, this partnership proved transformative, delivering benefits that went well beyond achieving certifications. According to an independent third-party survey, GEMCO reported the following results:

- ✓ **INCREASED SALES: \$1,000,000**
- ✓ **JOBS CREATED: 4**
- ✓ **COST SAVINGS: \$1,000,000**
- ✓ **NEW PLANT EQUIPMENT INVESTMENTS: \$250,00**

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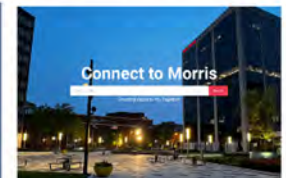
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Employment Horizons: Creating Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities

For individuals with disabilities, securing meaningful employment can be a challenge. Employment Horizons has been addressing this challenge for over 60 years, creating pathways to stable, rewarding careers.

The organization provides job training, career development, and direct employment opportunities, ensuring that individuals with disabilities have access to the workforce. Their programs serve a dual purpose—empowering workers while helping manufacturers meet their operational needs.

Through partnerships with businesses across New Jersey, Employment Horizons offers services such as:

- + **Packaging and assembly – Helping manufacturers streamline operations**
- + **Facility management and janitorial services – Supporting businesses with essential maintenance**
- + **Fulfillment and logistics support – Assisting with order processing and inventory management**

NJMEP's donation helps expand these programs, ensuring that more individuals can develop skills, gain financial independence, and contribute to the manufacturing industry.

Investing in People:

NJMEP's support for Employment Horizons and Bestwork Industries Strengthens Manufacturing

Manufacturing is more than just machines and production lines—it's about people. A thriving industry is built on a skilled, diverse, and empowered workforce. That's why NJMEP is committed to not only supporting businesses but also investing in organizations that create real opportunities for individuals facing employment barriers.

This year, thanks to the overwhelming success of 'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day, NJMEP was able to give back in a meaningful way, donating \$10,000 to both **Employment Horizons** and to **Bestwork Industries** for the Blind. These contributions are part of NJMEP's ongoing mission to strengthen the manufacturing sector by ensuring it is inclusive, accessible, and equipped for long-term success.

As we celebrate this partnership, it's important to recognize how these organizations are transforming lives and why their work is vital to the future of manufacturing.

Bestwork Industries for the Blind: Proving That Talent Has No Limits

While employment barriers exist for many, individuals who are blind or visually impaired often face even greater challenges in the workforce. Bestwork Industries for the Blind is dedicated to breaking down these barriers by providing job opportunities in a supportive, empowering environment.

As a nonprofit social enterprise, Bestwork Industries specializes in:

- + **Manufacturing textiles, office supplies, and other essential goods**
- + **Providing employment to individuals who are blind or visually impaired**
- + **Demonstrating that inclusivity and productivity go hand in hand**

Their work extends beyond just employment—it's about proving that every individual has the potential to contribute to the workforce when given the right tools and opportunities. NJMEP's support reinforces the belief that manufacturing should be a place for everyone, regardless of physical challenges.

'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day: A Celebration That Gives Back

Each year, 'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day brings together manufacturers, industry leaders, and policymakers to celebrate the strength of New Jersey's manufacturing sector.

Beyond networking and collaboration, the event serves a greater purpose: to reinvest in the industry and the communities that support it.

The 2024 event exceeded expectations, drawing record attendance and sponsorships. As a result, NJMEP was able to channel a portion of the event's success directly into supporting organizations that share our vision of an inclusive, thriving manufacturing workforce.

This moment is a testament to what's possible when the industry comes together—not just to innovate and grow, but to give back and make a tangible impact on people's lives.

How Manufacturers Can Support a More Inclusive Industry

NJMEP's partnership with Employment Horizons and Bestwork Industries is part of a larger effort to make manufacturing more accessible, diverse, and resilient. But building a truly inclusive workforce requires ongoing commitment from the entire industry.

Here's how manufacturers can help:

- + **Partner with Employment Horizons to create job opportunities within your facility.**
- + **Work with Bestwork Industries to source high-quality products made by a dedicated workforce.**
- + **Support ongoing initiatives through donations, advocacy, or volunteering.**

Every manufacturer has the power to shape the industry's future, and

by taking action, businesses can help create a stronger, more diverse manufacturing workforce.

More Than Just Manufacturing

At its core, manufacturing is about building—building products, building businesses, and most importantly, building futures. NJMEP is honored to contribute to organizations that create meaningful employment and prove that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, has the ability to thrive in this industry.

The impact of this year's 'MADE in NJ' Manufacturing Day extends far beyond the event itself. It's a testament to what's possible when the manufacturing community unites—not just to drive innovation and economic growth, but to ensure that success is shared by all.

By supporting organizations like Employment Horizons and Bestwork Industries, NJMEP reaffirms its commitment to a manufacturing sector that is not only strong but also inclusive, sustainable, and full of opportunity.

Together, we're not just making products—we're making a difference.



Preparing for 2025

Critical steps for manufacturers to take now.

In an era of rapid change, manufacturers face a landscape filled with both opportunities and uncertainties. Policy shifts, geopolitical tensions, and market disruptions create challenges that are difficult to predict but impossible to ignore. While the future remains uncertain, one thing is clear: manufacturers that prepare today will be better equipped to navigate tomorrow.

Taking proactive steps now can help safeguard your operations, strengthen your competitive edge, and open doors to new opportunities. With that in mind, let's explore actionable strategies that manufacturers can adopt to prepare for 2025 and beyond.

Strengthening supply chain resilience

The disruptions of recent years have shown how vulnerable global supply chains can be. Manufacturers relying on just-in-time models or a small pool of suppliers have experienced delays, shortages, and cost spikes. To mitigate these risks, manufacturers should prioritize supply chain diversification and resilience.

Steps to Take:

- 1. Expand Supplier Networks:** Work with multiple suppliers across different regions to avoid over-reliance on one source. Take the time to assess your current suppliers and identify potential partners that align with your quality and delivery standards.
- 2. Nearshoring Opportunities:** Consider bringing certain elements of production closer to home to reduce shipping times and exposure to

international trade uncertainties.

3. Supply Chain Technology:

Leverage tools like AI-driven analytics to monitor supply chain risks and optimize logistics in real-time. These tools identify bottlenecks, predict potential disruptions, and optimize inventory management.

By rethinking supply chains now, manufacturers can reduce their exposure to disruptions while positioning themselves as reliable partners for their clients.

Embracing technology and automation

Technology and automation continue to shape the manufacturing landscape, offering solutions to labor shortages, rising operational costs, and increasing competition. However, the key to successful adoption lies in viewing technology not as a replacement but as an enhancement to existing processes and workforce capabilities.

Steps to Take:

1. Invest in Smart Manufacturing

Tools: Technologies like IoT sensors, predictive analytics, and cloud-based systems can help streamline operations and improve decision-making.

2. Upskill Your Workforce:

Providing training for employees ensures they can effectively work alongside new technologies, fostering collaboration between humans and machines.

3. Pilot Programs:

Pilot programs

provide valuable insights into scalability and ensure smoother integration when expanding automation across the operation. Consider starting with repetitive, low-risk tasks before scaling up to more complex processes.

Automation is not about replacing people but enhancing their ability to deliver results. When technology is thoughtfully integrated, manufacturers gain a stronger foundation for innovation, efficiency, and long-term success.

Workforce development: closing the skills gap

The manufacturing workforce is evolving, with new skill sets needed to keep pace with emerging technologies and processes. The industry's challenge lies in attracting and retaining talent while preparing employees for the future of work.

Steps to Take:

1. Focus on Training Programs:

Whether through in-house initiatives or partnerships with training organizations, prioritizing skill development ensures your team stays ahead of industry shifts. Start by identifying skill gaps within your current workforce and matching them with available resources.

2. Create Pathways for Career

Growth: Employees are more likely to stay with an organization that invests in their professional growth. Clear pathways for advancement, supported

by mentorship programs or certifications, can foster loyalty and engagement.

3. Engage Younger Generations:

Attracting new talent begins with outreach. Collaborations with schools, technical colleges, and community programs can inspire younger individuals to explore careers in manufacturing.

Strengthening your workforce is an investment that pays dividends far beyond productivity. A skilled and motivated team positions your organization as a leader in the industry, capable of seizing opportunities and tackling challenges with confidence.

Staying agile in the face of policy changes

Policy changes—whether related to trade, environmental regulations, or tax reform—can reshape the business landscape. Staying agile and informed allows manufacturers to navigate these changes without losing momentum or compromising compliance.

Steps to Take:

1. Monitor Policy Developments:

Staying ahead of potential regulatory shifts starts with regular updates from trusted industry associations, government agencies, and trade organizations.

2. Engage in Advocacy: Joining trade groups or participating in legislative forums allows you to advocate for fair regulations

and gain insights into upcoming changes. Advocacy doesn't just protect your interests; it also helps build valuable connections within the industry.

3. Scenario Planning: Anticipating and preparing for multiple outcomes can help minimize disruptions when policies shift unexpectedly. Scenario planning—where you outline responses to different regulatory or market conditions—enables your team to act quickly and decisively.

Adapting to policy changes is not a one-time effort; it's an ongoing process that helps manufacturers avoid costly compliance issues and identify potential opportunities.

Looking ahead to 2025

The manufacturing industry has always been a cornerstone of innovation and resilience. By taking strategic steps now, businesses can navigate the uncertainties of 2025 with confidence. Strengthening supply chains, embracing technological advancements, and building a skilled workforce are not just best practices—they are essential measures to remain competitive for the new year and beyond.

While predicting the future is impossible, preparing for it is within reach. Manufacturers that act today will be best positioned to seize the opportunities of tomorrow, no matter what challenges arise.



Work with a Robot, Not Like a Robot: How Automation Empowers Today's Manufacturing Workforce

In today's fast-evolving industrial landscape, automation is becoming indispensable, yet a critical question persists: Are robots here to replace human workers or support them? The answer, increasingly, is the latter. The shift toward automation in the workforce emphasizes not the replacement of roles but an enhancement—an opportunity to work with robots as collaborative partners. This approach is transforming workplaces and the way we think about productivity, job satisfaction, and growth in various industries.

The theme, **“Work with a Robot, Not Like One,”** captures the essence of this shift, inviting us to consider automation as a partner in achieving more effective and fulfilling work environments. By reframing robots as collaborative assets, industries can harness automation to optimize tasks, empower employees, and advance overall productivity. Let's explore the benefits of this collaborative

approach and understand why automation's role is to enhance, not eliminate, the human workforce.

The Evolving Role of Automation in the Workforce

In the past, automation was often viewed as a replacement strategy, conjuring images of factory floors devoid of human workers, with machines shouldering all tasks. However, the present-day reality of automation for the small- to medium-sized manufacturing business is far more balanced and thoughtful. Today's technology prioritizes collaboration, with innovations in robotics, known as “collaborative robots” or “cobots,” designed to work safely and effectively alongside human employees.

Cobots are programmed with advanced safety protocols, and their purpose is to handle repetitive, physically demanding tasks that allow human workers to focus on more complex responsibilities. This collaborative model offers a practical path for companies that want to enhance output without sacrificing the vital role of human creativity, intuition, and decision-making in the workplace.

Benefits of Working With Automation

The use of automation as a workforce enhancer rather



than a replacement offers several key benefits. These advantages underscore why many industries are eager to adopt a balanced approach to automation that supports employees rather than sidelines them.

1. Boosting Productivity Without Overburdening Workers

Automation enables companies to increase productivity by allocating repetitive tasks, such as sorting, lifting, or assembly-line work, to robots. When robots take over these monotonous tasks, employees are free to tackle higher-level functions that require critical thinking and creativity. This approach maintains job roles while allowing businesses to grow more sustainably by maximizing both human and robotic potential.

2. Creating a Safer Work Environment

Workplace safety is always a priority, especially in industries involving heavy machinery, hazardous materials, or physically strenuous tasks. By assigning high-risk activities to robots, companies can create safer work environments that reduce the likelihood of injuries. Automation's ability to protect workers while maintaining productivity showcases its role as a valuable partner rather than a competing force within the labor market.

3. Job Satisfaction Through Task Variety

One of the primary benefits of collaborating with robots is an increase in job satisfaction.

Workers can engage in more diverse and challenging tasks when robots handle the repetitive and physically taxing aspects of production. The outcome is a more fulfilled workforce with employees who can develop new skills, adapt to evolving roles, and find greater purpose in their daily activities. Automation, in this sense, elevates the human role within the workplace.

Addressing Automation Concerns: Redefining Roles, Not Eliminating Them

While the idea of automation has led to concerns about job security, recent studies show that automation often results in job transformation rather than elimination. Automation doesn't eliminate jobs; it redefines them. As machines manage repetitive tasks, there is an increased need for skilled professionals to program, monitor, and maintain these technologies. This shift presents an opportunity for growth and skills development, where employees can step into roles that demand technical expertise and decision-making.

In reality, robots are far from replacing entire roles; instead, they act as tools that support the workforce, allowing employees to work smarter. By fostering a collaborative relationship between humans and robots, industries can offer employees the opportunity to expand their skills, handle more intellectually rewarding tasks, and pursue career advancement within an automated environment.

Building Skills for a Collaborative Future: The UR Training Academy

For manufacturers interested in working effectively alongside automation, training and skills development are essential. In New Jersey, small to medium-sized manufacturers can now access resources designed to help employees develop these critical skills. NJMEP's new UR Training Academy, set to launch on November 1, offers a unique opportunity for hands-on training tailored to collaborative robotics and workforce enhancement.

For more information on training options, contact NJMEP to explore how your team can benefit from this new initiative.

A Collaborative Path Forward

The phrase **"Work with a Robot, Not Like One"** encapsulates a new era of automation, one in which robots are allies in the pursuit of efficient, safe, and fulfilling work environments. Automation, when seen as a workforce enhancer, opens doors to productivity, job satisfaction, and safety, transforming traditional roles into more dynamic opportunities for growth.

As industries continue to integrate automation, the emphasis should remain on collaboration and mutual benefit. By investing in the skills required to work alongside robots, companies can ensure that automation will not only complement the workforce but also elevate it. In doing so, we create a world where technology and human talent thrive together, driving progress without sacrificing the core values that define the workplace.

Breathing New Life into the Machines That Drive Your Business Manufacturing

For manufacturers, every piece of equipment represents a significant investment. But as technology advances, older machinery often struggles to keep up with modern demands. The question arises: replace or re-engineer?

Re-engineering legacy equipment offers a cost-efficient and performance-enhancing solution that extends the life and functionality of existing assets. For small to medium-sized manufacturers, this approach combines cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability—creating opportunities for modernization and productivity gains without the expense of a full machinery replacement.

Let's explore the value of re-engineering, how it works, and what manufacturers should consider when evaluating this transformative option.

The Hidden Value in Legacy Equipment

Legacy equipment often gets a bad reputation for being inefficient or outdated. But the truth is, older machines are often built with robust materials and craftsmanship that modern counterparts sometimes lack. With the right modifications, these assets can perform as well as—or even better than—newer models.

Why Consider Re-engineering?

1. **Preserving Proven Reliability:** Legacy equipment that has proven its durability over the years can gain a new lease on life through targeted upgrades.
2. **Cost Advantages:** Re-engineering may provide significant cost savings when compared to purchasing new equipment, freeing up resources for other business investments.

3. **Cultural Familiarity:** Your workforce is already familiar with the machine's operation, reducing training requirements and minimizing disruption.

The question isn't whether your legacy equipment is outdated, but how it can be re-engineered to meet today's standards.

Transforming Equipment: The Steps to Re-engineering

Re-engineering goes beyond simple repairs. It involves rethinking the functionality, efficiency, and compatibility of existing machinery.

Here's how the process unfolds:

1. **Assessment of Capabilities:**
Every re-engineering project starts with a detailed evaluation of the equipment. What are its current strengths? Where does it fall short? Is it structurally sound enough to support modifications? These questions guide the entire process.
2. **Designing for Today's Needs:**
Once potential upgrades are identified, engineers create detailed plans for modifications. This may involve integrating new components, replacing outdated systems, or improving the machine's compatibility with modern production lines.
3. **Implementation and Testing:**
Re-engineered components are installed, followed by rigorous testing to ensure they meet operational and safety standards.
4. **Optimization and Training:**
After upgrades are in place,

adjustments are made for peak performance. Training is also highly recommended to ensure your workforce can leverage the improvements effectively.

5. Re-engineering vs. Buying New: A Balanced Perspective

The decision to re-engineer or replace equipment is rarely straightforward. Both options have their merits, and understanding their trade-offs is crucial.

The Re-engineering Advantage

Re-engineering offers flexibility. It allows manufacturers to tailor upgrades to their specific production needs without incurring the steep costs of new machinery. Additionally, it aligns with sustainability goals by reducing waste and maximizing the lifespan of existing assets.

However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations. If the core technology of a machine is entirely obsolete or incompatible with your future goals, re-engineering may offer diminishing returns compared to investing in new equipment.

Buying New: When It's Worth Considering

New machinery brings the benefits of cutting-edge technology, higher efficiency, and often longer warranties. But these advantages come at a cost—not just financially, but also in terms of downtime and workforce retraining.

Ultimately, the right choice depends on your goals, budget, and the condition of your existing equipment.

A careful analysis of total cost of ownership (TCO) can help guide the decision.

Tips for Successful Re-engineering

If you're considering re-engineering, planning and execution are key. Here are some actionable insights to help you achieve the best results:

- 1. Start with Data:** Use operational data to pinpoint inefficiencies and prioritize the most impactful upgrades. Understanding your equipment's current performance is critical for making informed decisions.
- 2. Invest in Expertise:** Re-engineering isn't a one-size-fits-all process. Partner with experienced professionals who can tailor solutions to your specific needs and ensure compliance with industry regulations.
- 3. Plan for the Long Term:** Don't just focus on immediate fixes. Consider how the modifications will align with your long-term production goals and future-proof your operations.
- 4. Communicate with Your Team:** Engage your workforce early in the process. Their insights can be invaluable for identifying pain points and ensuring a smooth transition once upgrades are complete.

Accessing Re-engineering Resources in New Jersey

For manufacturers in New Jersey, re-engineering support is readily available. NJMEP offers tailored resources for small to medium-sized manufacturers, providing expert guidance and services to modernize legacy equipment efficiently and cost-effectively.

To explore re-engineering options, email info@njmep.org or call 973-998-9801 to learn how you can revitalize your equipment and unlock its full potential.

Rebuilding for a Competitive Future

Re-engineering legacy equipment isn't just about saving money; it's about creating value. By modernizing existing assets, manufacturers can enhance productivity, reduce environmental impact, and maintain a competitive edge in an ever-changing industry.

The key to success lies in strategic planning and a willingness to embrace innovation. Whether it's upgrading a single machine or rethinking your entire production line, re-engineering offers a pathway to smarter, more sustainable manufacturing. With the right approach, breathing new life into legacy equipment becomes a catalyst for long-term growth.



A strong brand resonates with both emotional and tangible touchpoints, creating a narrative that encapsulates the company's values, mission, and the quality of its products.

Serving as the foundation upon which all marketing efforts are built, a brand needs to tell a unique and compelling story that sets the company apart from its competition and resonates with consumers.

Two distinct segments contribute to a company's overarching brand identity: the Consumer Brand and the Employer Brand.

Building a Consumer Brand

A consumer brand for a manufacturing company refers to the identity and perception of the company's products in the eyes of the end consumer. Branding encompasses the entire customer experience, from product design and packaging to after-sales service.

To build a brand that is both strong and successful, manufacturers should strive to create products that solve customers' pain points and offer a unique value proposition.

In a competitive market, having a unique brand identity can be a significant advantage for a company. It can lead to increased customer loyalty, higher price premiums, and can even influence purchasing decisions. In fact, 62% of consumers report that a brand's values heavily influence their purchase decisions.

A strong brand serves as a promise of quality and reliability that can

From Factory Floor to Brand Fame:

The Power of Branding in Manufacturing

In today's competitive market, the importance of branding in manufacturing cannot be overstated. Iconic brands like Caterpillar, known for its durable construction equipment, and PepsiCo, a leader in the food and beverage manufacturing industry, exemplify how strong branding can elevate a company's reputation and customer loyalty. Discover how a thoughtfully designed brand identity can set your business apart, build trust, and ensure lasting success.

Brand is more than a name or logo. A manufacturer's brand identity is the experience and perception that people have when interacting with the company and its products, whether they are current or potential customers, vendors, employees or prospective hires. While the essential components of a brand encompass the visual aspects such as logo, color palette, and typography, it's also much more.

help secure long-term business relationships.

Enhancing an Employer Brand

Most companies spend a large amount of time and effort creating and promoting their consumer brand without dedicating that same effort towards their employer brand identity. Essentially, an employer brand answers the question “why should potential employees want to come work for you?” A strong employer brand demonstrates a company’s culture, mission and values. A well-regarded brand can attract and retain top talent, which is essential for maintaining quality and innovation in manufacturing. This ultimately helps to improve the bottom line.

Companies with strong employer branding experience a 28% reduction in turnover rates.

Job seekers today spend a lot of time doing online research before applying to a job or accepting a job offer. Making employer branding a part of the company’s marketing strategy helps to build a positive image of the company, which will fill the talent pipeline with informed and excited prospects.

Manufacturing Your Brand

Building an effective brand in the manufacturing industry involves a multifaceted approach.

After a clear brand identity has been defined, companies should consider the components that lend to their visual presence in the marketplace. Elements such as company logo,

website, and sales materials should not only be visually appealing, but also reflect the brand's identity and values.

It's important to remember that the brand's visual presence, personality and tone of voice should be consistent across all marketing materials and touchpoints. This consistency helps in forging a strong, emotional connection with the target audience, making the brand more relatable and trustworthy.

Brand Reach & Engagement

In today's digital age, online visibility is paramount, and a robust online presence can significantly boost a brand's reach and engagement. Utilizing digital marketing strategies, such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Content Marketing and Digital Banners, manufacturers can enhance their brand's online profile to drive more traffic to the website and generate more leads. Let's talk a little about each tactic.

SEO, the art and science of aligning your website content with the algorithms of search engines, can dramatically increase a manufacturer's online visibility. Using relevant keywords and content that informs, educates and answers the right questions, SEO can generate equity with search engines like Google and Bing over time.

Content Marketing complements SEO efforts by focusing on the creation and distribution of high-quality, relevant content such as pertinent resources and information regarding trending topics impacting their industry.

By doing so, manufacturers can set themselves apart from the competition and become known as thought leaders in their trade, building trust with potential clients, who are more likely to choose a brand that demonstrates a deep understanding of their needs and challenges.

Just how important is Content Marketing? According to the Content Marketing Institute, last year alone, 58% of B2B marketers reported increased sales and revenue from their efforts.

Types of popular content include blog posts, whitepapers, case studies, and videos that showcase expertise, innovations in the field, or even company values and community support. In fact, research suggests that 89% of customers want to see more videos from brands .

While content marketing can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, it's beneficial to repurpose evergreen content or repackage and update it to breathe new life into it.

It's also important to remember that the type of content produced should align with the consumption habits of the target audience. Using data and analytics, manufacturers can track which content draws the most attention and engagement. This allows them to refine their marketing strategies, create more of the content that resonates, and even tailor their product offerings to better meet market demands. In an industry where precision and efficiency are paramount, the ability to quickly adapt to consumer needs based on data-

driven decisions can be a significant competitive advantage.

In conjunction with other tactics, Digital Display Banner Ads are an effective way to keep the brand visible and create top-of-mind awareness. Even when the target audience is not on the company's website or scouring the web searching for a product, both active and passive target consumers will be exposed to the brand messaging. Ads can be targeted to the optimal demographic audience such as age, occupation, job titles, etc to draw them to your site. Once a prospect has seen the ads or visited the company site, ads can be used to re-message that person to keep the brand top-of-mind.

Incorporating these digital strategies into a manufacturer's marketing plan is a wise move that helps ensure the business remains competitive in the future.

Branding Is Fluid

Finally, it's important to remember that branding is NOT something that can be defined once and forgotten. Market conditions and consumer preferences are always changing and evolving. Perhaps the visual forms and assets of your brand may hold steady, however the overall intent or personality of a company brand identity will and should grow over time. Continuous investment in brand development and adaptation to economic, environmental or society changes is essential for maintaining relevance and resonance with the target audience.

Harnessing Brand Power Is Vital

The power of branding and awareness in manufacturing cannot be overstated. It is a vital component of a business's success, influencing everything from customer perception and loyalty to employee recruitment and market differentiation.

Businesses with consistent branding see an average revenue increase of 23%. This consistency helps in building a recognizable and trusted brand, leading to higher sales and customer retention.

Manufacturers that recognize and leverage the strength of their brand are often the ones that thrive in a competitive marketplace.

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NJ's Cutting-Edge Medical Technology Sector Saves Lives Around the World

The manufacturing sector in New Jersey faces unique challenges, from fluctuating raw material costs to maintaining a skilled workforce. In such a competitive environment, controlling expenses without compromising employee satisfaction is critical. **One strategy that has gained traction among manufacturing companies is self-funded health insurance.**

What is Self-Funding?

Self-funded health insurance, also known as self-insurance, allows employers to pay for employee healthcare costs as they are incurred rather than purchasing a traditional fully insured plan from an insurance carrier where a premium is paid regardless of how much healthcare is used. In a self-funded model, the employer assumes some of the financial risk for providing healthcare benefits but gains greater flexibility and potential cost savings. It's a common misconception that employers cannot quantify the actual risk. With the ability to purchase stop loss insurance on individual claims above a certain threshold as well as aggregate coverage for all claims, the maximum and expected program costs can be easily illustrated.

Why Should Manufacturers Consider Self-Funding?

Manufacturers, especially those with medium-large workforces, can benefit from self-funding in several ways:

1. Cost Control and Transparency

With self-funded plans, employers gain detailed insights into where healthcare dollars are being spent. Unlike fully insured plans where premiums are



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set by the carrier, self-funded plans provide a breakdown of claims costs, administrative fees, and stop-loss insurance. This transparency allows manufacturers to identify cost drivers and implement targeted strategies to reduce expenses. This is especially important for pharmacy expenses which are growing at a rate of inflation far above other healthcare expenses. New transparent pharmacy solutions, like Mark Cuban's low cost drug solutions, are game changers for employers looking to reduce costs without sacrificing the quality of their health plans.

2. Flexibility in Plan Design

Manufacturers often have diverse employee populations with varying needs. Self-funded plans offer the flexibility to customize benefits to align with workforce demographics. For example, a company with a significant number of employees in physically

demanding roles might prioritize robust physical therapy and wellness benefits.

3. Avoiding State-Mandated Premium Taxes

In New Jersey, fully insured plans are subject to state premium taxes, which can add up quickly for larger companies. Self-funded plans, governed by federal ERISA regulations, are exempt from these taxes, providing immediate savings.

4. Cash Flow Advantages

Unlike traditional plans where premiums are fixed and paid upfront, self-funding allows manufacturers to pay claims as they arise. This can improve cash flow and make budgeting more predictable, especially during periods of lower claims activity.

5. Addressing the Risks

While the potential benefits of self-funding are significant, it's not without risks. One major concern is the financial liability of high-cost claims, such as those stemming from catastrophic health events. To mitigate this, most self-funded employers purchase stop-loss insurance, which provides protection by capping the employer's exposure to large claims. Additionally, with the advent of group purchasing arrangements and captives for stop-loss insurance, even smaller employers can self-fund with limited downside risk.

Is Self-Funding Right for Your Company?

Self-funding may not be suitable for every manufacturer. Companies should evaluate their workforce size, claims history, and financial stability before making the switch. Here are a few indicators that self-funding might be a good fit:

- ✓ A workforce of at least 50 employees, as larger groups tend to have more predictable claims patterns.
- ✓ A commitment to data-driven decision-making, as self-funding requires ongoing analysis of claims data.
- ✓ Access to resources such as benefits advisors and third-party administrators (TPAs) who can help design and manage the plan effectively.

Next Steps

For manufacturing companies exploring self-funding, partnering with the right

advisors is crucial. An experienced benefits consultant can help assess feasibility, structure the plan, and navigate compliance requirements. Additionally, they can recommend strategies like wellness programs, telemedicine, and employee education to further optimize costs.

Self-funding isn't just a cost-saving tool; it's a strategic approach that gives manufacturers greater control over their benefits program while supporting employee health and satisfaction. In an industry where every dollar counts, it's worth considering whether self-funding can help your company strike the right balance between financial efficiency and employee well-being.



ALEX SMITH
PARTNER AT ACRISURE



EmpowerU: Skills for the Modern Workplace.

With the new year in full swing, the Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey (CCSNJ) is excited to announce a workforce development program open to manufacturing companies and their employees across the state.

Launched January 1, the CCSNJ has entered into a premier partnership with Rowan College of South Jersey (RCSJ) for EmpowerU: Skills for the Modern Workplace, a professional certificate program to help employees train on the soft skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Key takeaways from the training program include:

- ✓ **Self-Awareness:** Understanding your strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and how they affect your behavior and relationships.
- ✓ **Communication:** Effectively conveying ideas and actively listening, ensuring clarity and mutual understanding in interactions.
- ✓ **Teamwork:** Collaborating with others, valuing diverse perspectives, and contributing to group efforts to achieve common goals.
- ✓ **Problem-Solving:** Analyzing challenges and developing creative, practical solutions to overcome obstacles.
- ✓ **Time Management:** Prioritizing tasks, staying organized, and allocating time

effectively to maximize productivity.

- ✓ **Leadership:** Inspiring and guiding others, making decisions, and motivating a team towards achieving goals while fostering a positive work environment.

The program will welcome its first student cohort in March with a second in September. Students will undertake a six-week training with three weeks of virtual classes and three weeks of in-person classes at a location to be determined in the South Jersey area.

Employees can sign up either on their own or on the suggestion of their employers. The sign-up may be part of a new employee's onboarding process but may also be used by employers to train some of their long-standing staff members.

The program is funded by the tuition fees paid by participating chamber member businesses. Those businesses pay \$150 per employee who is sent to the program.

For more information,
visit the CCSNJ website at:

www.chambersnj.com/empoweru/

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New Jersey Drug Pricing Council: We Need Experts to Protect Patients and NJ Manufacturing

Last year, Gov. Phil Murphy and the New Jersey Legislature launched a new initiative intended to lower the cost of medicines for New Jersey patients – the **Prescription Drug Affordability Council (PDAC)**. The Council, with members appointed by various lawmakers and stakeholders, formally met for the first time in late 2024.

Lowering health care costs is a universally shared and laudable goal, but one fraught with the complexities of not only price, but also the promise of saving lives around the world with new treatments and cures.

There are smart and immediate ways to lower costs for patients – ways that don't stop the medical advances that so many New Jerseyans work to research, discover, manufacture and deliver to patients. Yet, many of the proposals often floated for addressing these same costs end up benefiting insurance companies instead of patients. That is something the Council needs to protect against.

There are ways to lower health care costs and prescription prices that balance protecting patients without hampering the innovative capabilities of the life sciences sector. The fastest and easiest way to lower the cost of prescription medicines for patients is to require PBMs and insurance companies to immediately pass on the billions of dollars in

rebates and discounts offered by drug manufacturers directly to patients at the pharmacy counter, instead of being pocketed by PBMs and insurers.

Unfortunately, this Council has blatant connections to the insurance industry, which would prefer to attack the companies discovering and manufacturing these medicines while pocketing those same cost-savings intended for patients. Representation on the Council includes insurance industry partners but no representation from the experts who actually spend billions of dollars finding new treatments and cures.

While we remain hopeful that the PDAC can interpret the data it receives to develop unbiased solutions, we are already concerned that it will instead be focused on punitive and stifling regulations designed to protect the insurance industry and their allies. Rules which were specially adopted by the Division of Consumer Affairs offer further concerns by enabling the PDAC to operate outside the scope of the enabling statute.

As this initiative gets further underway, we urge the PDAC and New Jersey policymakers to consider the entirety of the health care system and its supply chain while enabling our state to continue doing what it does best – saving lives around the world by finding new treatments and cures right here in New Jersey.



CHRISSY BUTEAS
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER, HEALTHCARE INSTITUTE OF
NEW JERSEY (HINJ)



SHCCNJ Membership: Empowering NJ's Manufacturing Women Leaders

The Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey (SHCCNJ) gives Hispanic business owners the tools, resources and connections needed to thrive in a competitive marketplace. With benefits like no-cost training programs, exclusive partner offers, media exposure and robust networking opportunities, SHCCNJ ensures that members have a voice and a pathway to grow and succeed.

We see this in the inspiring journey of **SHCCNJ member Lilia Rios, co-founder of La Providencia®** showcasing the power of collaboration and determination.

Founded in 2005 in Passaic, New Jersey, La Providencia® began as a vision shared by two young entrepreneurs, Lilia Rios and Francisco Del Toro. Their dream of creating a business that embraced and celebrated Mexican culture quickly gained traction. By 2008, La Providencia® was registered as a brand and began to manufacture Mexican Folk Art, Kitchenware, Cleaning supplies, and Fiesta Supplies.

As their reputation grew, so did their reach. In 2010, the Distribution Center in Laredo,

Texas opened, allowing the company to serve 10 additional states, which set the foundation for nationwide expansion. In 2013, they renovated and expanded their Cash & Carry store in Passaic, New Jersey, boasting over 10,000 square feet of authentic Mexican decorations and folk art. This facility services seven East Coast states and two cities in Canada.

By 2016, demand for La Providencia® products prompted the relocation of their East Coast Distribution Center to a larger facility in Hope, New Jersey, enhancing their ability to serve five East Coast states with direct store delivery. The journey continued in 2021 with a move to a bigger facility in Houston, Texas, ensuring better service for their growing Texas customer base.

Today, La Providencia® is more than a brand; it is a leader in the East Coast Hispanic Market, offering an array of authentic Mexican products that resonate with its customers in 22 states.

Through Rios' membership with SHCCNJ, she has accessed invaluable resources, from media exposure to strategic networking opportunities. Her story shows how SHCCNJ helps business owners achieve their full potential by offering tailored support and a vibrant community.



SHCCNJ continues to champion businesses like **La Providencia®**, highlighting the vital role of women in manufacturing and the broader economy. By providing resources, networking opportunities and a platform for success, the chamber supports entrepreneurs like Lilia Rios, demonstrating its commitment to empowering Hispanic women and fostering leadership in New Jersey's manufacturing sector.



LILIA RIOS

MEMBER, BOARD OF DIRECTORS
STATE-WIDE HISPANIC CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE OF NEW JERSEY (SHCCNJ)



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At the heart of this initiative was the Mobile Training Lab, an innovative classroom on wheels equipped with cutting-edge tools like 3D printers, CNC machines, and robotics. Students were able to interact with real equipment and processes, sparking curiosity and dispelling outdated myths about the industry. At each stop, the tour also connected students with local manufacturers, providing them with real-world perspectives on career opportunities.

These hands-on demonstrations allowed students to see manufacturing in a new light—not as outdated assembly lines, but as hubs of creativity and technology. For many, it was the first time they considered manufacturing as a viable and exciting career path.

Statewide Impact: Highlights from the 2024 Tour

Over the course of 2024, the Future Makers & Creators Tour made an indelible impact across New Jersey. Stops included:

- ✓ **Piscataway High School**
(Middlesex County)
- ✓ **Plainfield High School**
(Union County)
- ✓ **Orange High School**
(Essex County)
- ✓ **Camden High School**
(Camden County)
- ✓ **iLearn High School**
(Bergen County)
- ✓ **Passaic High School**
(Passaic County)

At each location, students experienced the future of manufacturing through interactive demonstrations and face-to-face conversations with

Empowering the Next Gen: The Future Makers & Creators Tour

The Future Makers & Creators Tour, a collaborative initiative by NJEDA and NJMEP, has **transformed the way students across New Jersey view modern manufacturing**. Designed to bridge the gap between education and industry, this program provides hands-on exposure to advanced manufacturing technologies, introduces students to local manufacturers, and inspires them to explore careers in a dynamic, ever-evolving field.

In 2024, this groundbreaking initiative took center stage, reaching schools and students across the state with one clear mission: to empower the next generation of manufacturers.

Breaking Barriers: Bringing Manufacturing to Students

Manufacturing is often misunderstood, with lingering stereotypes that fail to reflect its modern realities. The Future Makers & Creators Tour sought to challenge these misconceptions by introducing students to the dynamic world of advanced manufacturing.

local employers. For many, it was a transformative experience that shifted their perceptions of manufacturing.

Key Outcomes of the 2024 Tour:

Engagement: Hundreds of students and local manufacturers participated, fostering valuable connections.

Empowered Students: Hands-on experiences with tools and technologies encouraged students to think critically about their skills and introduced them to potential career paths in manufacturing.

Community Building: The initiative strengthened ties between schools and local manufacturers, fostering partnerships that benefit both education and industry.

Workforce Development: By inspiring students and introducing them to potential employers, the tour contributed to addressing the skills gap in manufacturing.

A Year of Reflection and Growth

Reflecting on 2024, it's clear that the Future Makers & Creators Tour achieved its mission of inspiring the next generation of manufacturers. By combining education, technology, and industry engagement, the initiative not only sparked interest in manufacturing but also laid the groundwork for meaningful change.

Students who once saw manufacturing as inaccessible or irrelevant now view it as a world of opportunity. For manufacturers, it offered a chance to connect with future talent and showcase the possibilities their industry holds.

This initiative also highlighted the power of collaboration—bringing together NJEDA, NJMEP, schools, and local manufacturers to create a program that tackled workforce challenges while showcasing the potential of manufacturing careers.

Looking Ahead to 2025

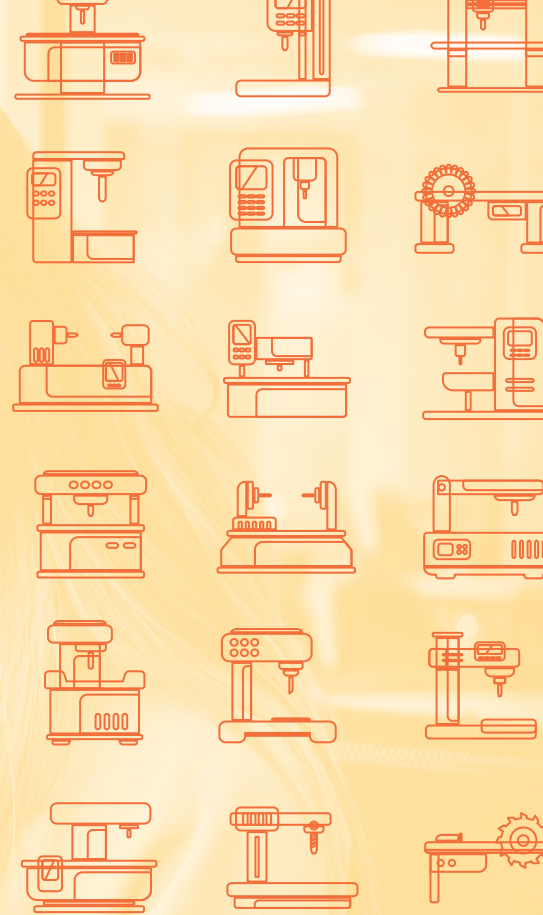
As we look to 2025, the Future Makers & Creators Tour shows no signs of slowing down. Plans are already underway to expand the program's reach, bringing the Mobile Training Lab and its resources to even more schools across New Jersey.

With every stop, the initiative aims to continue inspiring students, building partnerships, and addressing critical workforce challenges. The hope is that by extending its reach, even more young people will see the opportunities waiting for them in manufacturing, and even more manufacturers will find the skilled workforce they need to thrive.

This forward momentum is a testament to what can be achieved when education and industry come together with a shared vision.

Join the Movement

The Future Makers & Creators Tour is more than an initiative—it's a movement that's redefining workforce development in New Jersey. Whether you're a manufacturer looking to connect with future talent, an educator eager to bring hands-on learning to your students, or a community leader invested in economic growth, there's a place for you in this journey. Together, we can inspire the next generation of makers and creators and ensure that manufacturing continues to thrive in our state.



Join us in making a difference. Visit Makers and Creators Tour or Contact NJMEP today to learn how you can support or participate in the Future Makers & Creators Tour.



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