

The Workforce Challenge and Why Traditional Hiring Isn't Enough | Part 1 of 3

The workforce shortage is a business risk, not just a Human Resources problem.



For many precision machining shop owners, workforce challenges are often framed as an unavoidable reality: “There just aren’t any workers or machinists out there.” But treating the worker shortage as a hiring problem or worse, an HR problem, misses the bigger issue. Workforce development is a core business risk that directly affects profitability, customer satisfaction, and long-term competitiveness.

The shortage of skilled workers in manufacturing is not a short-term cycle. It is the result of demographic shifts, retirements, underinvestment in training pipelines, and decades of misconceptions about manufacturing careers. The impact shows up daily on the shop floor: unfilled positions, overtime fatigue, delayed deliveries, quality risks, and stalled growth plans. In many cases, shops are turning away work not because of capacity or technology limitations, but because they don’t have enough people to run the machines.

The real risk isn’t just today’s open positions; it’s tomorrow’s skills gap. As experienced machinists retire, valuable tribal knowledge leaves with them. At the same time, new technologies through automation, advanced CNC controls, data-driven quality systems are changing the skills required to stay competitive. Shops that don’t actively develop talent risk falling behind, regardless of how modern their equipment may be.

Forward-looking shop owners are shifting their mindset from hiring to building. Workforce development becomes a strategic investment, much like capital equipment or quality systems. This means thinking in terms of pipelines rather than positions: entry-level talent, structured training, mentorship, and long-term retention. While this approach requires planning and patience, it creates stability and resilience that reactive hiring simply cannot.

Importantly, PMPA shop owners do not have to solve this challenge alone. The PMPA Educational Foundation (pmpafoundation.org) exists as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) specifically to support the precision machining industry’s workforce needs. In 2026, the Educational Foundation’s Board of Directors will launch a strategic plan to develop training initiatives, partnerships with educators, and industry-aligned programs. The Foundation will plans to harness the full potential of machining careers and strengthen the pathways into the trade as the strategic plan gets off the ground.

The shops that will thrive in the coming years are not necessarily the ones with the most machines, but the ones with a deliberate strategy for developing people. Workforce development is no longer optional. It is a business decision that affects every part you ship and every customer you serve.

Questions Every Shop Owner Should Ask

- If I look ahead five years, where are my biggest skills gaps likely to be?
- How many of my key machinists could retire in the next decade?
- Am I overly relying on the labor market to solve a problem I should be solving internally?
- What would it cost my business not to invest in workforce development?

Part 2 of this series will focus on how shop owners can practically build and manage entry-level talent pipelines. **P**

Emily Riley, MAT, MBA has over 20 years experience in supply chain management, R&D leadership, operations, innovation and product development and education. Email: eriley@pmpa.org — Website: pmpa.org.