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HEADLINE: Machine Shops are Struggling to Attract, Retain Young Workers

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BODY:

Joshua Krone has liked designing things and working with his hands for as long as he can remember.

So when Krone, 21, graduated from high school three years ago, he followed his brother in becoming a machinist at Accellent, an Orchard Park maker of scalpels, surgical needles and other medical equipment.

Today, Krone works the night shift, balancing his job with daytime engineering classes at Erie Community College.

But he doesn't plan on sticking around for long.

"It's a good job for how young I am, but I don't think I could see myself doing it for the rest of my life," Krone said. "Eventually I do want to become an engineer."

Throughout the Buffalo area, **machine shops** are struggling to attract and retain young workers. Despite wages that can top \$ 50,000 a year for talented, experienced machinists, many young people are simply not interested in making a career of it.

"It's just very hard to find anyone with machining skills," said Lee Backus, Accellent's human resources manager. "We've seen pressure on all of our jobs, especially recently."

At Tony Staub's **Machine** Co. in Hamburg, owner Tony Staub said he's facing a similar situation as he looks to bolster his small staff to handle increased orders of antennas and safety valves.

"I've been forced to get stuff done with fewer people," Staub said.

Staub, along with educators and young workers like Krone, blame the shortage of interest on outdated views of the industry and pressure from parents and high schools to go to college and get white collar jobs.

"It's almost cultural," said John Metz, director of career development services for BOCES, which runs vocational programs for area high schools. "Society and what we see on TV has created this image that everyone needs to go to college and work at a desk to have a good life."

From Metz' perspective, the bias against trades was apparent from the image problem BOCES suffered in many of the high schools it served. For years, many kids ridiculed BOCES students as stupid and even used the program's name as a synonym for "retard", sending a clear signal to those who wanted to participate.

This perception has subsided, but its effects remain among some parents, Metz said.

Paul Goodrich, who runs ECC's **Machine** Tool Technology Degree Program, said many students tell him that they've been discouraged from machining.

"Before, kids who liked working with their hands were told to go this route," Goodrich said. "But mom and dad aren't saying 'you've got to learn a trade' anymore."

Goodrich, who worked in machining for over 20 years before joining ECC, said the flight of industrial jobs from Buffalo has also made people weary to enter machining. But, he said, many smaller companies will continue to need skilled machinists and people can make a good living doing it, especially since there's now so little competition.

"How many stories have you heard of people with four-year degrees who can't find jobs? But how many machinists do you know who can't find jobs? I don't know any," Goodrich said.

In this environment, Metz said that all graduates of his machining program who wanted a job found one and started with good pay.

Local employers remain tight-lipped about their exact wages, but when presented with national averages, many said their rates were very similar.

Nationwide, wages for machinists averaged about \$ 34,000 a year, with about 10 percent making over \$ 50,000 a year, according to a May 2004 study by the U.S. Department of Labor.

But despite the plentiful jobs and middle class wages, the BOCES machining program's enrollment of 35 students remains in the "bottom third" of all BOCES programs, far behind popular courses like cosmetology and auto repair, which draw about 370 students each.

To many, **machine shops** are still seen as noisy, dirty places that send workers home smeared in oil. Around here, they also bring back memories of manual labor in the steel mills and foundries of Buffalo's bygone era of gritty prosperity.

But most modern **machine shops** are clean and computerized.

An hour into their shift at Accellent, Krone and his co-workers had clean clothes and only slightly grimy hands. The shiny gray floor they work on also remains spotless as computer-controlled **machines** hum around them, cutting parts with a precision of 1/10,000th of an inch. At various locations around the production floor, yellow robotic arms encased in glass pick up finished parts and polish them against a microscopically fine sander.

"Basically, these **machines** are running by themselves," said Jeff Somerville, team leader for Accellent's night shift. "With the old manual **machines**, they wouldn't do anything unless you pulled the lever."

With all these technological changes, job requirements have also changed. On a typical day, machinists at Accellent spend most of their time setting up and monitoring the **machines**. They check a sampling of the parts that come out with digital gauges, or micrometers, and load metal stock when the **machine** needs more.

Backus said computer skills and technical skills are even more important for today's machinists than traditional metal cutting skills.

To facilitate this training, local employers have formed the Manufacturing Alliance Group. The group will hold a job fair Thursday in the B Building of ECC's North Campus between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Earlier that day, Krone will have spent time at ECC for a different reason, attending classes to complete his engineering degree.

"Machining is good work, but for me its just not enough," Krone said.

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