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Skilled workers are scarce

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Manufacturers find it hard to fill positions

Wisconsin manufacturers say a national survey is right: It's getting harder and harder to hire skilled workers. "It is pathetic," said Pam Treige, president of Knabe Tool Works in Madison. "We have had extreme difficulty in hiring CNC operators."

CNC—or computer numeric control—machines are becoming increasingly important in modern manufacturing. They are often computer-controlled machines used to form parts out of steel with very precise specifications.

"We have had to advertise in Milwaukee (and Kenosha to see if we can get anyone to move here," said Peggy Holley, human resources manager at Fristain Pumps in Middleton. "When we need a skilled person, we'd like to be able to pick from several, which is never the case."

Wisconsin companies have said that welders are also particularly needed, said state labor economist Eric Grosso. According to a survey released this week by the National Association of Manufacturers, the Manufacturing Institute and Deloitte Consulting, the supply of skilled manufacturing workers is shrinking even as the techni-

cal demands of today's factories are growing, making it hard for the U.S. to compete in the global economy. "That's so true," said Harlan Vangen, program director and instructor of Madison Area Technical College's machine tooling program. At any time, there are 40 to 50 students in the two-year program, but

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that's not enough to fill the available jobs, he said.

John Metcalf, director of human resource policy with Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, the industry's major business association in Madison, said it's a statewide problem.

"Certainly, anecdotally, we hear that quite frequently — manufacturing employers are frustrated. They can't find new workers to come into some of these positions," Metcalf said.

Treige said she thinks high school guidance counselors make students feel inferior if they don't plan to attend a four-year college. Meanwhile, news reports point to factory work that's being outsourced to foreign countries.

"I think kids are looking at as not having much of a future," Treige said.

Vangen said today's tool and die shops "aren't the old greasy machine shops we thought of in the past." The industry needs to do a better job educating the public, he said.

"I think people aren't aware of all of the avenues, all of the possibilities and great career options in the machine tool field. I think that's the key," Vangen said.