



# Survey surprise: Lots of (high-paying) jobs, but little interest in filling them

NJMEP's annual unscientific survey shows manufacturing sector is another struggling to find workers

By Tom Bergeron (Cedar Knolls)

John Kennedy, the head of the New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program, is quick to admit it: He's no pollster. He's just a guy with a pretty extensive, sector-specific email list.

"There's nothing scientific about this," he said. "Every year, we ask manufacturers two questions: What job can't you fill? And how many people do you need right now?"

The results speak for themselves.

This year's unscientific poll showed there are more than 43,000 manufacturing jobs available — about a 25% increase from what Kennedy was expecting and what has come in during the eight previous years he has taken the poll.

And, of the roughly 2,000 manufacturers who responded, the average need is for 4.7 people — or about a 50% increase from the last time the survey was taken, in 2019.

"I don't know if it's a fear of COVID or an unwillingness to work," Kennedy said. "All I know is that these are frightening numbers."

They could be good numbers.

In a sense, they show that there are plenty of pathways to well-paying jobs. Kennedy frequently touts the fact that the average advanced manufacturing job pays nearly six figures.

"These are careers," he said. "A lot of them need at least some semblance of college; some need degrees. They all need some specific training. But they lead to careers, not just jobs."

"The problem is: There's no pipeline of talent right now."

Gov. Phil Murphy's administration, through the Department of Labor & Workforce Development, is working to change that. It has started a number of job-training and apprenticeship programs — many in collaboration with MEP.

"There's been a lot of work on this," he said. "The DOL, the county colleges, the CTE schools are all doing great things. But there's clearly more that needs to be done."

Kennedy knows these types of programs work. It's how he got started in a career that eventually saw him earn a Ph.D. and start — and sell — two companies.

“My career started as an apprentice,” he said. “I’m proud of that. And I’m proud that I was able to build a career in an industry that I love.”

He worries that the sector — which is stronger in New Jersey than most realize — could struggle moving forward. He talks with manufacturers who are thinking of heading elsewhere all the time, he said.

The good news: New Jersey is not the only place that's hurting.

“Whether it's South Carolina or Montana or wherever, this is the reality,” he said. “We hear from other MEPs. Every state is struggling through the same thing, because there is no pipeline.

“For the prior eight years we've done this, the number has been in the low to mid-30,000s. To see it jump this much is alarming.”

You don't need to be scientist to see that.

“It's not perfect, but I have to think it's a reasonable estimate,” Kennedy said. “Obviously, something made it jump up a bit. We have to figure out why. We have to change the paradigm.”

### **The Top 10 jobs manufacturers need to fill**

According to a very unscientific survey by NJMEP:

1. Technical sales
2. Machine technicians/mechanics
3. Machinists-manual/CNC
4. Machine operators
5. QA/QC validation
6. Welders
7. Supply chain/logistics
8. Specialty craftsman – tool & die, mold-makers
9. Engineers/designers
10. Accountants (especially those with a background in cost)