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## The **gender** card

Do **women**  
make better  
managers?

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# The gendercard

While lean manufacturing and continuous improvement initiatives get all the headlines, the emergence of women into management is equally important in changing the face of manufacturing, says Thomas R. Cutler

**With the exception of** World War II, the topic of “women in manufacturing” would be a short discussion. Manufacturing has always been a male dominated environment, but over the past decade women have made significant entry into the sector. From the factory floor to the boardroom, more women are finding gainful employment in manufacturing, and their presence is changing how business is conducted.

Despite reports of massive layoffs in the manufacturing sector, there is still a skills shortage. According to the Skills Gap Report by the National Association of Manufacturers’ (NAM) Manufacturing Institute, more than 80 percent of manufacturers surveyed experience an overall shortage of qualified workers.

*Women in Manufacturing—A Booklet of Best Practices*, published by the NAM, notes that at many large manufacturing companies, it is not unusual to find half the production employees to be women. NAM data

also shows that the number of female-owned manufacturing companies has nearly doubled in the past decade. These companies grew by 38 percent over a seven year period, while the sector as a whole grew by eight percent during the same time frame. NAM estimates that women now own 19 percent of all manufacturing firms with employees.

The perception of women in manufacturing has changed as a result. Employers now recognize that women are particularly willing to embrace change and innovation, and learn new skills, as well as being strong communicators. Some suggest that women’s abilities in these areas have been honed by their experience in managing, listening and ‘getting things done’—skills they have developed by multi-tasking their way through the challenges of school, family, and work.

Kellie Johnson, president of ACE Clearwater Enterprise, a Torrance, California-based aerospace

component manufacturer, notes this phenomenon. “Because there have always been more men in manufacturing than women, women have developed better communication skills,” she says, “since we have had to learn, over time, how to talk to men to navigate throughout the workday. Women have this ‘laser-like’ ability to get right to the heart of the matter, with the precision of a surgeon’s knife, and get the job done.”

Since women have always had to juggle work and family responsibilities, less time is wasted on long meetings and non-productive work events, an approach that is synchronistic to a lean manufacturing environment which eliminates wasteful tasks.

Johnson comments that women are a growing and important part of her company’s workforce, and that women fill all of the company’s key positions. “Women seem to be much more receptive to training,” she says, “not quite as defensive as men in feeling that they already know everything. A

woman entering our workforce is more apt to say, 'I'm here and I'm willing to learn and grow.'"

Johnson suggests that men are becoming more receptive to women in the manufacturing environment and are beginning to understand that in order for a company to be successful learning has to be a continuous, lifelong process—for everyone. "As more women become exposed to manufacturing, they are seeing the tremendous career opportunities that exist and they are entering the workforce with stronger skill sets than in the past. Women bring a completely different perspective to the workforce, they are helping us to see the issues and challenges outside of the traditional box, and how to balance work and family responsibilities."

Karla Aaron is president of Hialeah Metal Spinning, Inc., of Hialeah, Florida, a precision metal forming manufacturer. She has seen many younger women entering the manufacturing field, and notes that their expectations are different. "Younger women entering our workforce have family responsibilities, and are in relationships where there are shared family activities," she says. "When these women come to meetings, they want information now and they want it fast."

Because family responsibilities are still disproportionately managed by women, long meetings are replaced with action-items and measurable metric accomplishments. "This is causing a shift in perception," says Aaron, "a shift in the willingness to make meeting formats a bit different, make some accommodations, and make some timelines different." One consequence of this is to allow younger males to take

on more family responsibilities, making it easier for everyone to balance work and home life.

At Click Bond, Inc., a manufacturer of proprietary aerospace fasteners in Carson City, Nevada, COO and owner Collie Hutter also notes that most of the departments in her company have women employees. "Many people have the misconception that jobs for women in manufacturing exist only on the plant floor," she

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says. "But at Click Bond we have women in every department—sales, purchasing, planning, inventory control, accounting, and our shipping department is managed by a woman."

Hutter believes that women have more patience, and are therefore better able to deal with the problems encountered in a typical business day. "If you've raised a two-year-old and then survived your kid's teenage years, you have learned patience," she says. "On the assembly line, our women workers are able to see all elements—gathering components, packaging, labeling—and get great satisfaction from doing the job correctly and not having any of their boxes returned."

Sandy Westlund - Deenihan, president and design engineer of Quality Float Works of Schaumburg, Illinois, a manufacturer of metal floats, faced many challenges as she began her

career in manufacturing. "I was mentored by men," she says. "I worked alongside men and I had to work twice as hard as a man to earn respect—just to be taken seriously, but I think these tougher challenges have made me more focused and more confident, and have given me a greater resolve in running a business."

Westlund-Deenihan also echoed Hutter's mantra of what it takes to be a successful woman in manufacturing.

"It takes patience, patience, patience—to overcome the roadblocks that men don't have to face." She viewed each challenge as an opportunity to succeed and find solutions. This determination helped to make her 93-year-old firm one of the fastest growing companies in the US.

Westlund-Deenihan believes that manufacturing is still suffering from the 'Hollywood' image as a down-and-dirty, dead-end industry. "Here at Quality Float Works, we are not the company that my grandfather founded. We are not using hammers and nails on the production floor—we're using lasers and numeric controls, advanced manufacturing and robotics."

Advances in technology have helped to open the door for technically savvy women to progress in manufacturing jobs that pay above average wages and offer good benefits. There is no doubt that women are making a positive impact in the industrial work environment. Attention to detail, shorter meetings, patience, concern for family and work life balance, interest in health and well-being are attributes manufacturers value in their quest to become employers of choice. Now you know where to find them. ■