

The State of Manufacturing

Adjustments to production and safety emphasizes the need for a qualified workforce **BY PAUL T. MORRIS**

DURING THE EARLY ONSET of COVID-19 in the United States, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) conducted a survey of manufacturing leaders to examine the economic and operational impacts of the pandemic. The results of the survey informed NAM's COVID-19 Policy Action Plan recommendations. The survey revealed three major concerns of manufacturers related to COVID-19: 1) the financial impact; 2) the anticipated change in operations; and 3) supply change disruptions.

NAM President and CEO Jay Timmons said, "Across the country, manufacturers are stepping up to keep their employees and their communities safe and healthy, and working closely with elected officials, we can ensure the resilience not only of our companies but also our country."

Although the concerns highlighted by NAM were captured from manufacturers nationally, similar concerns and issues are prevalent among

Delaware manufacturers. John Gooden, president of M. Davis and co-chair of the Delaware Manufacturing Association, recently stated, "The one constant over the course of this pandemic has been continuous change. If you come to work and think you are going to follow the plan you had yesterday, don't bother coming to work as that plan doesn't work for today's condition."

The manufacturers who are doing well have figured out how to be nimble and adapt to the COVID landscape. In Delaware, adjustments were implemented in manufacturing as early as March. These changes included the donning of masks, social distancing, additional cleaning, reconfigured crews, remote work, temperature checks, traffic flows for people, hand sanitizer and the like.

The next piece of the equation that manufacturers grappled with was the

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additional costs associated with these changes and how to financially recover while continuing to produce a competitive product. From what we've seen in Delaware, manufacturers have figured out how to stay open, make a valuable product and most importantly, keep their people safe.

Once initial adjustments were made, then came supply chain disruption, quarantining, contact tracing and travel restrictions. Increased onshoring is one potential solution to help with some of the supply chain issues, but material and equipment coming in from overseas is still more likely to be delayed than not. If subject matter experts are coming in from overseas, it's more than likely it will be tough getting them here in a timely fashion. With the rate of community spread, it's virtually impossible to avoid some employees who must quarantine. When were they exposed? When was their last shift? Who came in contact with that employee? What's the incubation period? Where can they be tested and when will they receive results?

All these variables create a domino effect that significantly impacts the operations of manufacturers and will likely be the norm well into 2021.



Companies that maintain the discipline needed to manage the virus, can be successful, but cannot relax. The heightened intensity leads to COVID anxiety and fatigue.

"To stay the course, successful manufacturers are working to share the COVID-19 responsibilities across their leadership and management teams," said Gooden.

Even with all the challenges stated above, many Delaware manufacturers are performing at or above pre-pandemic production levels. This means hiring and retaining qualified workers is more important now than ever, and the demand for skilled laborers highlights the drastic need to work together in order to increase Delaware's talent pipeline.

In the response to the pandemic, some manufacturers are expanding production with additional shifts or physically increasing the size of their facilities; therefore, creating a need to find and hire qualified workers. Gooden summed up the current state of manufacturing when he said, "The pandemic will continue to be a challenge for the foreseeable future. In my opinion, manufacturing in the first state is finding ways to keep their team safe while still getting their product out the door." ■



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