

ISSUES_INNOVATIONS 3_25 Western Pennsylvania Steel Fabricating, Inc.

THE ISSUES – WORKFORCE and APPRECIATION of FOSSIL FUELS

Fred J DeFiore, President/CEO, Western Pennsylvania Steel Fabricating (WPSF)

“Your complete source for heavy plate & structural steel fabrication. Located in New Castle Pennsylvania, we are a full-service steel fabricating facility bonded and insured. With 49 years of experience, we can satisfy any steel fabrication request.”

Take a quick look at the WPSF website. <https://wpsfinc.com/projects/> Their projects are, typically, very large and not easily recognizable, but they are critical to various market niches. They primarily services steel mills, mining, and electric power generation. They have also provided projects for use in the nuclear and wind markets. An example of a project, recently shipped, was a ladle car which was 20 feet wide and weighed 78,000 pounds! One of the photos on the website shows an employee standing nearby, dwarfed by the fabrication.

Both Fred and Denise were very forthcoming in identifying their major challenge, workforce. They do not struggle to find work. In fact, it is fair to say, that lack of workforce is a barrier to increased production. They currently employ 17 skilled tradespeople along with 5 employees who work within programming, pricing, purchasing, and general support functions. In comparison, in 2007 they had over 40 employees and were operating two shifts. Currently, they operate one shift.

They are always looking for skilled tradespeople and strongly lament the lack of quality candidates. They use five staffing agencies. When candidates are hired, they work for approximately three months on the job, through the staffing agency, before a final decision is made to hire permanently.

WPSF looks for candidates proficient in various levels of mathematics, i.e., general math including fractions, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus, depending upon their position.

Many candidates they have interviewed over recent years, struggle to pass a basic math test. Many cannot read a standard tape measure which is extremely important to all positions. “Schools are failing us when candidates cannot add and subtract simple equations or work with basic fractions.”

WPSF hires for various positions, “Welders are, generally, easier to find than some other skills since there are quite a few vocational schools that have welding programs. Accomplished welders are not.”

The average tenure for production/shop employees is 10.5 years. The most tenured employee has been with the company for 46 years.

Examples of other positions, more difficult to hire for, are industrial fitters, quality assurance inspectors, and people proficient in reading drawings.

The second issue briefly discussed, was the use of fossil fuels and the perception by some that “they are dirty and harmful to the environment.” Their viewpoint is that the energy industry is dependent on fossil fuels and will be for some time. “In Pennsylvania we’re sitting on a gold mine of fossil fuels. It’s abundant and accessible. It provides good jobs for the manufacturing sector and trickles down to other market niches. Many people don’t recognize how dependent they are on fossil fuels.”

“Business has increased a great deal since the presidential election,” provided a transition to ask about tariffs. They noted, “We agree with tariffs and trust the wisdom and experience of President Trump. We realize that change may cause some short-term pain, but the long-range results will compensate. It’s time for America first.”

Fred mentioned, “WPSF customers primarily want domestic steel. In fact, if the circumstances result in the necessity of sourcing material outside the United States, we can make the client aware of what’s available and they can approve, or the client can dictate where to source it. If this is the case, the country of origin must be one who has a trade relationship with the United States.”

After seeing the size and weight of the pieces WPSF produces I asked about shipping. They have several trucks operating within a radius of approximately 300 miles. Freight can be provided by WPSF but, typically, clients coordinate their own logistics.

I am a long-time admirer of small manufacturers. Hats off to Fred DeFiore, President/CEO, Western Pennsylvania Steel Fabricating!