

HILL ISSUES & OBSERVATIONS J.W. Steel rev 3

ISSUES & OBSERVATIONS

Lee Takach, Vice President, J.W. Steel Fabricating Co.

“For more than 40 years, we’ve delivered dependable, high-quality steel fabrication to industries across energy, manufacturing, mining, marine, utilities, construction, and more.” ... “Our professionals here at J.W. Steel Fabricating Co. near Pittsburgh, PA, possess the skills, technology, and equipment necessary to meet the highest of customer standards.”

What an enjoyable conversation I had with Lee Takach. When asked, “What keeps you up at night?” he said “workforce “like many other businesses I speak with.

He has 16 employees but does not consider the business fully staffed and could use 5-6 more workers. In some instances, he hires right off the street and does on-the-job training. For other positions like engineering and project management he requires the applicant to have some experience.

How does he find workers? He uses a combination of temporary staffing agencies and “Help Wanted” signs around the local area. The starting rate is \$18.00 per hour. No one will work for less than that.

Lee recalled that hiring used to be as simple as putting out a stack of applications. He had three shifts back in the early to mid-2000’s. Then **J.W. Steel** did a lot of work for steel mills and coal plants since decommissioned. Now it’s hard to staff one shift.

The most challenging spot to fill is “Fitters.” In the fabrication business a “Fitter” has a drawing to work from and assembles already formed parts into an industrial piece. It involves tack welding and safely handling heavy parts. It takes time to train a “Fitter.”

What was so noteworthy about **J.W. Steel** Fabricating is they have some young employees. While ten per cent are near retirement, the average age is 40, and he has had his share of 18–26-year-olds.

Lee shared his general observations about his young workers. They want a decent quality of life and are not interested in overtime. Those that live at home don’t feel the same pressure starting out as older generations. Benefits are not a driving force. Their phones are like appendages and while **J.W. Steel** frowns upon their use on the job, he knows if he said “NO PHONES” they would leave. He noted their communication skills are lacking, and he senses they feel awkward with eye-to-eye contact. Absenteeism is also more common in this age group.

For those interested in advancing and who understand the career ladder, there is a path based on the employees' capabilities. In the case of on-the-job training, he will start them with simple tasks like grinding and punching. He takes note of their attitudes and how well they get along with the rest of the team. Advancing goes on from there. **J.W. Steel** will reimburse for further education providing the coursework applies to the workplace and the employee keeps at least a "C" average. Few, however, have taken advantage of this generous offer.

Another interesting observation is the company's location in Mars near Cranberry. That's a drawback since it is an affluent area and there are not many people looking for work. The cost of living is increasing and housing can be an issue with one-two-bedroom apartments renting for \$1200-\$1500. There is no mass transportation.

How's business? **J.W. Steel** business follows a bell curve, up and down. Sometimes it is very busy for two straight years and then a slow period follows. While some businesses can fill a slow period by producing inventory and parts for future use, not so with **J.W. Steel**. They are a shop, and each client has unique needs.

About the workforce, he is hopeful, and senses more young people will opt for the trades. Parents may now understand that not all kids need a four-year degree and the accompanying debt. His final observation: "Trades will follow where the work is."

Good Luck Lee!

Did you know that fabricators do not consider themselves manufacturers? Apparently, there is a distinct difference. A fabricator constructs pieces to order while a manufacturer may produce many of the same pieces.