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Future of Factories: The movement behind employee wellness in an increasingly employee-centric economy

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Published 6:52 a.m. ET Jun. 22, 2021 | Updated 1:14 a.m. ET Jun. 23, 2021

It's no secret that manufacturers are struggling to hire and retain employees. One of the side effects of the pandemic has been upending an employer-centric economy and placing the reins in the hands of the employee.

Manufacturers are now paying more and offering incentives for employees they didn't before.

Director Of Operations Diane James of Hubbell Industrial Controls pointed out that they have 25 open jobs and are experiencing high levels of turnover. Jobs in assembly and brazing at their plant used to go for \$11.50 an hour and have now gone up to \$13 and \$14 per hour with full medical, dental, vision, and 401K benefits after 30 to 60 days on the job.

Besides increased pay, a renewed focus on employee wellness and development has emerged from the pandemic, and two manufacturers in Asheboro and Burlington have gone through transformations in the past year. Both of them experienced a boom in business during the pandemic, and both had to deal with the ensuing growing pains of an expanding business.

One of those businesses, Haand, is a handmade porcelain pottery manufacturer who survived COVID by pivoting its business from selling to restaurants to marketing direct to consumer. As their operations expanded, Chris Pence, the co-founder of Haand, enlisted the help of the NCMEP (North Carolina Manufacturing Extension Partnership), which provides free or low cost services to help small manufacturers in the area.

As Haand experienced a crazy year with COVID and expanded quickly, different issues would come up and be handled in haphazard ways.

"We started the company 10 years ago and never developed an organizational chart," Pence explains, "When things needed to be done, it would end up on my plate or my partner's plate,

and then we'd hand it off to someone who seemed like they could handle it."

Kevin Grayson, Assistant Director of Technology Management at NC State, helped them with organizing employees and assigning them specific job areas, thus putting them in a position to grow their careers. It helped distinguish whether a person would focus on something for "the next five minutes or the next five years," as Pence put it.

Out of their conversation with the NCMEP emerged a clear sense of roles and responsibilities, including a dedicated person to focus on career development. When juggling various roles and putting out fires, topics like career growth can often fall into the back burner.

"Every employee needs to understand where they are going within a company. During COVID last year, everything was so chaotic. I had no time to sit down with all of my employees," recalls Pence. "I just had an open conversation about what's working, what's not working, and how I see their job moving. I think it's created good morale."

An exploration into ergonomics

An Asheboro manufacturer took a different approach to employee wellness. Trotters Sewing Company, headquartered in Asheboro, is a contract cut and sew company, creating products from mattresses to medical paraphernalia. Owner Lori Trotter says their business grew dramatically during the pandemic due to increased demand for PPE.

"Immediately, we started getting phone calls about helping with masks and gowns and PPE. I got phone calls from different hospitals; I got phone calls from government agencies. And we were pretty overwhelmed," recalls Trotter.

As employees at the sewing company were spending long hours in the factory, Trotter worked with engineers at A&T University to make ergonomic improvements to their workflow. The study of ergonomics involves shifting your mindset so that the work is modified to better fit the worker. With the help of A&T engineers, Trotter experimented with different chairs and different ways of moving the product along the factory floor.

Julia Abate, Executive Director for The Ergonomics Center of North Carolina, explains her work: "We look at forces that people have to generate. We look at the postures people have to work in. And we looked at how frequently...or how long they have to work."

Abate and her team of ergonomics experts also go into companies and provide recommendations to improve a worker's ergonomic situation. With a training grant from

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration), Abate has taught subjects like best practices for safe lifting and ways to place inventory so that people are less likely to get injured.

A rule of thumb is "keep things in easy reach," Abate explains, meaning that objects in the assembly line should be placed in such a way that doesn't strain muscles from repetition. COVID-19 also introduced new challenges to creating an ergonomic workspace.

"The biggest thing with ergonomics with respect to COVID is a lot of these different safety features were implemented in factory floors, so you had screens, you had spacing that was introduced." Abate points out, "Some of those things can introduce greater risks within ergonomics."

Many of these services offered to manufacture around ergonomics and organizational development are also low cost or virtually free. The North Carolina Manufacturing Extension Partnership receives millions of dollars from the federal government, and bright students at A&T and NC State's Ergonomics Center often offer their services in exchange for job experience on their resume.

These resources allow smaller manufacturers to increase employee wellness and safety throughout North Carolina in the hopes of creating healthier and more fulfilled workers.

Our Future of Factories series investigates how manufacturing in North Carolina is adapting to the pandemic and innovating for the future. Subscribe and sign up for our newsletter to stay tuned.

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