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Making it in Massachusetts

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MANUFACTURING IN Massachusetts is a story of past glory steeped in textiles, paper, furniture, and footwear. That, at least, is the conventional wisdom. But a new Northeastern University study shows that manufacturing is a larger part of the state economy than it was a decade ago - and is poised to grow in importance.

Still working on shop floors in Massachusetts are about 300,000 workers, mainly making electronics, fabricating metals, and manufacturing other durable goods. It's a far cry from the 800,000 factory jobs on line during World War II. But researchers at Northeastern's Center for Urban and Regional Policy found surprising strength in a sector with 8,600 plants, many of them technologically sophisticated firms with upbeat CEOs on the lookout for new employees.

Prepared for the Boston Foundation, the report reads like a journal article by scientists who discover a species once thought extinct. The authors write that their analysis is "almost diametrically opposite" to a widespread assumption that manufacturing is a marginal player in the state economy. In 2006, the gross state product associated with the manufacturing sector was nearly \$40 billion, or 13.3 percent of the state's output. A decade ago, manufacturing accounted for 10.9 percent of the total.

The study gives the Patrick administration much to consider. As in other sectors, manufacturing CEOs are worried about the high costs of health insurance, workers' compensation, and housing. But the greatest concern is whether manufacturers will be able to fill an estimated 100,000 job openings over the next decade.

College readiness is a major focus of Governor Patrick's new education reform strategy. But the Northeastern study suggests a wider role for the state's 38 vocational schools. College is not the only route to success for the state's young people. Skilled production workers earn about \$20 per hour, according to the report. Unskilled workers in manufacturing, with a mean hourly wage of \$12.81, still outearn their counterparts with similar skills in the retail, healthcare, and hospitality sectors.

Aligning the curricula in vocational schools and community colleges with the needs of advanced manufacturers could pay off handsomely for both workers and the state's economy.

Factors ranging from climate to labor costs pose challenges for local manufacturers. But the celebrated days of Mass.-produced goods may still be ahead. ■

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