

# Sunday Bulletin

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## Smaller companies are struggling to fill the demand Manufacturing jobs & new hiring tactics

Matt Grahn Norwich Bulletin | USA TODAY NETWORK

**E**ager to attract younger prospective workers, manufacturers in Eastern Connecticut are trying more hiring tactics than ever before - from ads and hiring bonuses to developing the next generation. • There were 158,400 people in Connecticut's manufacturing industry as of March. This is still down from before the pandemic, where there were 160,200 in the industry in March 2020, according to the Connecticut Department of Labor.

Despite the smaller workforce, military contracts are making more work for people in the industry, and companies have more open spots to fill. With the regional demand, there are several companies in different types of manufacturing pursuing the same people.

"We're all pulling from the same limited pool," Collins and Jewell CFO and principal Chris Jewell, who is also the president of the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance, said.

Jewell said that the smaller companies, in particular, are struggling to fill the demand.

Collins and Jewell, based in Bozrah, had 90 employees before the pandemic. Currently, the company is at 72 employees. The losses were from other opportunities opening up across the job market, though some people came back to Collins and Jewell.

**"You're seeing a lot more aggressive recruiting manners, which tells you that the problem is real."**

**Chris Jewell**

Collins and Jewell CFO and principal

**169,200**

160,200 people worked in Connecticut's manufacturing industry in March 2020

**158,400**

Only 158,400 people worked in the same industry as of March, leaving potential 10,800 positions unfilled

few years out from entering the full-time workforce.

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## Hiring

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"We're taking who we can find now in the moment, but also who we can start integrating in this world so that, when they come of age, they'll remember us and become part of our team," Jewell said.

**Referral bonuses, high school recruiting and job search websites**

Kenneth Fontaine, President and CEO of Amgraph Packaging in Baltic, said the company increased referral bonuses from \$250 to \$2,500, and is also getting in touch with high schools, passing out fliers to get entry-level talent.

"Getting people to fill our positions has been difficult until maybe the last six weeks," Fontaine said. "We're getting a little light at the end of the tunnel."

Between Amgraph's two Connecticut facilities, Fontaine said there are 20 open positions, and there will be more in the future, mostly from an increase in business, estimating a 20% to 25% increased need.

"We built a new plant right before COVID," Fontaine said. "It's tough to build up a new plant during COVID because we couldn't travel, but now that we can travel to sell our goods, it's ramping up pretty rapidly."

Fontaine said he'd normally just post jobs to the company website, and on one job search platform. Now, Fontaine said he's using five different platforms to try and reach people, along with using more networking to find skilled employees.

"It never used to be so difficult," Fontaine said. "You could put an ad in the paper and on a job board, and you'd get more résumés that what you knew what to do with. Vetting them was the problem, now, getting them is the problem."

Fontaine said he doesn't really have a time-frame on when he'll fill his open positions, saying "I wish it was yesterday," as he plans on hiring a second wave of 15 people after the current hiring wave.

**Hired on the spot, trained on the job**

"There's such a hiring need in Eastern Connecticut," said John Murphy, executive director of the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance. "Eastern Connecticut is growing faster in manufacturing than the state overall."

Murphy spoke at a career fair earlier this month, where at least 12 different companies attended, along with 76 students from six different school districts who have been taking classes as a part of the Youth Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative.

While the event is mainly about getting the students familiar with the companies, a few of the seniors were hired on the spot.

Beyond manufacturing for the defense industry, there's expansion going on in plastics, sheet metal fabrication, medical device manufacturing, and more. With that need, Murphy said companies are more willing now to train someone up, rather than just hire the fully experienced candidate. Fontaine said he's hiring on some people as apprentices, as long as they have an aptitude for similar kinds of work.

"A lot more companies are willing to hire for character, and build capacity," Murphy said.

Jewell said that there are different opportunities for a worker going to a local company versus a larger one. While a larger company can pay better and have

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better benefits, the smaller local companies offer a more personalized experience.

"Sometimes, workplace happiness is just as important as money, and finding that balance is the key," Jewell said.

The only challenge then, Murphy said, is to bring awareness, earlier on. Murphy mentioned that he's planning on attending a manufacturing career fair in the fall aimed at middle school students and their parents.

"This is a great career for anyone," Murphy said. "Financially, manufacturing will be growing for the next few decades."