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Manufacturing is Misperceived, Despite Digital Revolution

Proto Labs survey shows more than two-thirds of Americans do not see manufacturing as a high-tech career choice

MAPLE PLAIN, MINN.—October 5, 2016—While today's "smart" factories are driving demand for digitally skilled workers, a majority of Americans (71 percent) still do not perceive manufacturing jobs as high-tech occupations. With Manufacturing Day close at hand, those attitudes portend problems for U.S. industrial companies, which will need workers to fill an estimated 3.5 million manufacturing jobs during the next decade.

The national survey – conducted by ORC International on behalf of Proto Labs, a digital manufacturer – reveals a lack of public knowledge about how digital technologies have transformed industrial production in the 21st century.

"Skilled workers in computer development and engineering are breathing new life into a storied industry," said Vicki Holt, CEO of Proto Labs. "The same skills required of software developers at places like Google, Facebook and Amazon are now being applied in the manufacturing industry."

Still, when asked to describe the daily routine of someone employed in manufacturing today, 55 percent of survey respondents cited dated images of workers among machines. While plant floor roles remain an important part of the manufacturing ecosystem, the industry has introduced additional roles that help power the digital manufacturing revolution.

Only about 10 percent of respondents associate a software developer in front of a computer screen with today's manufacturing jobs. These manufacturing workers are developing software that expedites the front end of the manufacturing process — before a machine even gets involved — and enables more efficient work on the plant floor.

And those workers are well-paid for their skills, despite the perception of a third of survey respondents (33 percent), who do not believe manufacturing jobs are high-paying. In fact,

software developers in the digital manufacturing space often earn more than $100,000 per year, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

The public's misperceptions about U.S. manufacturing already are negatively affecting the industry. Over the next decade, nearly 3.5 million manufacturing jobs will likely need to be filled because of baby boomer retirements and U.S. economic expansion, according to the Manufacturing Institute. But an estimated 2 million of those jobs could go unfilled.

"The manufacturing industry must do better," Holt said. "Highly skilled, well-paid and technology-driven jobs are thriving in manufacturing. We need to ensure that we have the talent needed to reach our full growth potential."

Holt pointed out that parents play an important role in providing the skilled workers needed to sustain America's manufacturing sector.

"Digital manufacturing is creating a variety of new technology-enabled manufacturing careers, as well as reinventing many of the traditional manufacturing jobs that continue to be very much relevant and needed," Holt said. "Parents who recognize this trend can help their children embrace math, engineering and the sciences in school. Young people who are educated and skilled in these areas can have promising, high-paying jobs in manufacturing."

About the survey
The public-opinion online poll was commissioned by Proto Labs and conducted by ORC International's CARAVAN® Geographic Omnibus in September 2016. It consisted of a sample of 1,023 adults comprising 512 men and 511 women 18 years of age and older. The margin of error is +/-3.1 percentage points for the full sample.

About Proto Labs
Proto Labs is the world's fastest digital manufacturing source for custom prototypes and low-volume production parts. The technology-enabled company uses advanced 3D printing, CNC machining and injection molding technologies to produce parts within days. The result is an unprecedented speed-to-market value for designers and engineers and an on-demand resource throughout a product's life cycle. Visit protolabs.com for more information.

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