

A Machine Repairman's Guide to Resolving the Labor Crisis

By Ellen Campbell

At Campbell, we are approaching the skilled labor crisis in our community with the same three-fold method we use to repair and rebuild forging machines. The first step is a careful inspection or investigation of root causes. Whether it's a cracked ram or a labor shortage, serious problems often stem from several causes. During this process we will gain a better understanding of the crisis – the size and scope of the problem. Next, we will use the data we gathered to create a repair plan and put that plan into action. Finally, we will map out a preventative maintenance program with the goal of growing and retaining an excellent team of skilled workers.

The People Problem

You've probably opened your LinkedIn page and read the staggering labor statistic provided by the Manufacturing Institute and Deloitte. "Over the next decade, 4 million manufacturing jobs will need to be filled." [1] The crisis it seems, is not a lack of manufacturing jobs, but a lack of *people*. It's official. We are currently experiencing a population decline, and this is an important root cause to understand. In Sebastian Dettmers' October 20, 2022, article for *Business Insider*, he explains that the current massive population decline is directly linked to the current labor crisis. "By the end of this century, the global population will have decreased by 1 billion people from its peak, according to a 2020 analysis by researchers at the Gates Foundation." [2] What prompted this population crisis? In a word: fear. In 1968, one book, "fueled an anti-population-growth crusade that led to human rights abuses around the world." [3] Stanford professor, Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*. It was an unlikely best-seller. However, "his multiple appearances on the 'Tonight Show' helped spread fears that our planet could not sustain itself." [4] Fifty-four years later, it appears that many Americans heeded Ehrlich's warning. It's ironic. In our attempt to control an erroneous population crisis that was not threatening our well-being, we created a real population crisis that is threatening our well-being. With this foundational cause of the labor crisis in mind, we can better understand why retirement of Baby Boomers punctuates our people problem.

Innovation and Globalization

In his series of articles titled, "Technologies that Changed Us" David Gewirtz highlights the rapid advancement of technological breakthroughs over the past fifty years that dramatically changed how we behave. From walking on the moon to the world wide web, rapid advancement in technology changed the American culture and the ways we live and work. This perfect storm of technological innovation and globalization blew through the American

manufacturing workforce, upending entire communities. Oddly, just as technological innovations indicated the need for training and educating the next generation of skilled tradesmen, voc-tech programs disappeared from high schools across the U.S.

The causal connection between globalization and technological advancements effected men more profoundly than women. "The share of men ages 25 to 54 who are considered part of the labor force fell around 88 percent from 97 percent a half-century ago." [5] This reflects the loss of manufacturing jobs, as men predominantly held them. The Pew Research Institute states that male workers of every race fared worse than women during the "Great Recession." Of the total 7.5 million people who lost their jobs, 5.4 million were men. [6] A dozen years later, we see the next generation of prime-age men actively avoiding work.

Labor Force Drop Outs

It's true. There is a new labor demographic: They are called the non-employed. Do we have evidence that there are enough non-employed prime-age men to fill the current labor shortage? It seems so. In her study on the disappearance of prime-age men from the workforce, economist, Didem Tüzemen, reports that back in 1996, "4.6 million prime-age men did not participate in the labor force. By 2016, this number had risen to 7.1 million." [7] Looking at these numbers, it seems that the work force is alive, but the work ethic is dead.

Back in 2005, journalists, economists, psychologists, physicians, and labor experts rang the alarm bell to wake up a complacent culture. Article after article begged the question: Where did our young men go? Yet, as the labor crisis intensifies, many people willingly cater to the indolence of millions of capable young men. Although research points to parents as prime enablers, it is U.S. government subsidies that pay men not to work. "The average working man received \$500 in benefits from the government in 2014. The average non-working man got \$5,700. Disability payments seem to account for a large share of the benefits the non-employed receive, and it's an open secret that most are not truly disabled." [8] And this data does not include Covid aid and unemployment benefits.

In 2017, the National Bureau of Economic Research published a paper titled, *Leisure Luxuries and the Labor Supply of Young Men*, examining the link between video gaming and non-employment. The quartet of researchers explain that "non-employed young men now average 520 hours a year in recreational computer time, sixty percent of that spent playing video games. This exceeds their time spent on home production or non-computer related socializing with friends." [9]

Lethal Games

But how does gaming in leisure time undermine a prime-age man's interest in work? In a word: addiction. Medical researchers at the Cleveland Clinic explain that "video game addiction, also called internet gaming disorder, is a condition characterized by severely reduced control over gaming habits, resulting in negative consequences in many aspects of one's life, including self-care, relationships, school and work." [10] This is not an isolated medical finding. The World Health Organization officially classifies and defines gaming disorder in its International Classification of Diseases. The WHO describes the disorder as, "impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests." [11] Does the WHO consider gaming disorder an addiction? In the WHO's definition of addiction, it states that, "the life of an addict may be dominated by substance use to the virtual exclusion of all other activities and responsibilities." [12] They emphasize the sociological consequences when they add, "the term addiction also conveys the sense that such substance use has a detrimental effect on society, as well as on the individual." [13] By its own definition, the WHO confirms that gaming disorder qualifies as an addiction.

Problems Reveal Solutions

Our investigation has given us valuable information to consider as we draw up a repair plan. Did we find other broken parts during our investigation? Indeed. Behind years and years of neglect, we discovered a generation of broken and lost young men who need help and healing. This is where creative thinking enters the repair process. How can we help prime-age men join the workforce and reclaim their innate human dignity? We'll address this question and a repair plan in our next article.

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