

# Wanted: Help

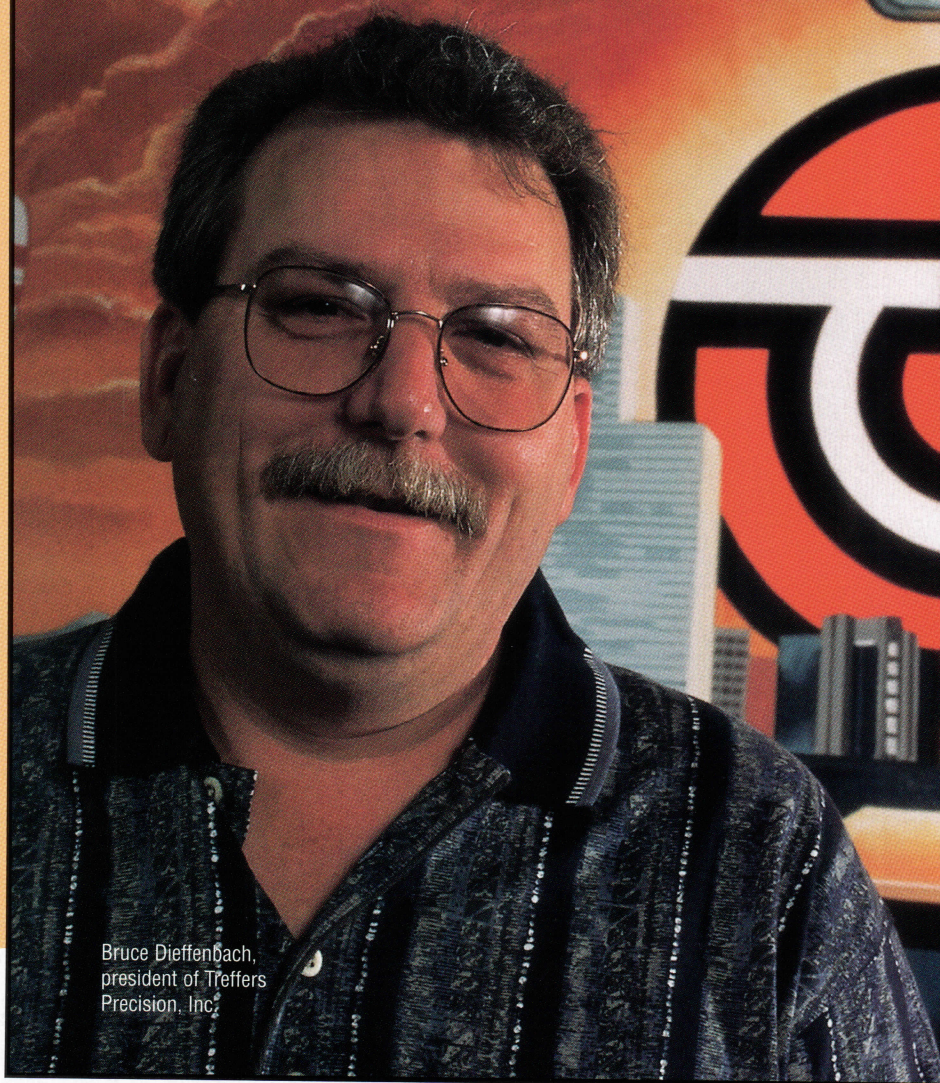
## Arizona Leaders Tackle Work Force Readiness

by *Cynthia Scanlon*

photography by *Timothy Hacker*

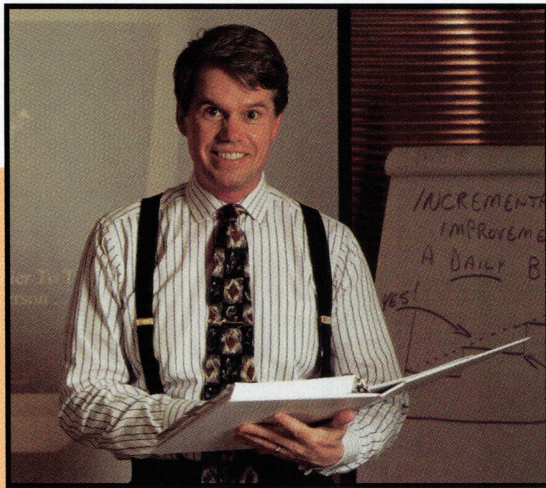
**I**t doesn't take much to look around and see "Help Wanted" and "Now Hiring" signs dotting the landscape. No doubt, Arizona, like much of the country, is experiencing a serious labor shortage. And in places, depending on the industry, it is severe. Manufacturing has been especially hard hit.

The factors responsible for this state of affairs seems to run the gamut, with the two leading contenders, business and education, taking the brunt of accountability in preparing a ready work force. "It has taken a tight labor market to bring this problem to the forefront," says Todd Bankofier, senior vice president for the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce.



Bruce Dieffenbach,  
president of Treffers  
Precision, Inc.

Neil Dempster,  
vice president of  
Clear View  
Performance  
Systems



Eric Simonson, vice president and general manager of Sundrella Casual Furniture, a Valley company that manufactures outdoor patio and pool furniture concurs with the sentiment. "I talk to a lot of people in various industries. It's hitting everyone," he says. "I just met with people in Fargo, N. D. They are experiencing the same thing there."

At issue seems to be businesses' desire to have its work force trained in a certain way, but failing to communicate that to the people responsible in education. "In the K through 12th grade system, there's a huge gap between the business world and the education community," says Bankofier. "What the teachers are under the impression they should be teaching to students to prepare them for the future is far different than what the business community believes they should be teaching. Therein lies the big gap."

To illustrate this point, the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce recently polled 250 of its members and found that 32 percent of them rated the competency of the work force very poor, a statistic that the chamber found "striking and cause for concern."

### Follow the Finger

Holding only education accountable for the lack of a qualified labor force, is, of course, easy. And to be sure, education does deserve some of the blame. But business is also recognizing that it has failed to help the labor process in any meaningful way either. And many business people are beginning to sit up, take notice, and get involved.

One of the most qualified to speak on the issues of labor shortages and work force readiness is Neil Dempster, vice president of Clear View Performance Systems, a Valley training and development company. Dempster is the chairperson for the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce Work Force Readiness Committee and Metro Phoenix Human Resource Association Work Force Readiness Committee. These organizations claim 4,500 companies in their memberships. Dempster is also on the Governor's Work Force Development Council, and is involved in the School-to-Work program.

"There has been a lot of finger pointing and some of it is valid," says Dempster. "I believe that everyone involved in this process has not been working together."

Dempster acknowledges that the business community should shoulder much of the blame for the lack of qualified workers here in Phoenix and around the nation. "In the last 10 years, we've changed our business methods 180 degrees," he says. "When did we ever communicate those changes back to the manufacturing plant? We never have. A lot of us haven't been doing the job we can do, and we've been remiss in our duties."

Dempster is troubled by the lack of communication by the business community, especially when it comes to working directly with educational institutions. He points out that only 3 percent of school boards are made up of business people. "We are not accepting our responsibility," he says. "We need to be there to guide the process. Now we can sit and complain or we can do something about it."

### Follow the Path

At the heart of the matter for many is the vocational or technical career path vs. the university career path. And critics on both sides of the issue are sharply divided. "There is a huge push for everyone to go to college, and it is being driven by parents and counselors," says Barry Nathan, president of Advancing Employee Systems, Inc. "But the bulk of jobs do not require a college education. If you should as a counselor suggest someone would be better off going to a technical school, there is a perception that the student is being tracked. And no one wants to hear that their child is not smart enough or motivated enough to go to college."

Nathan says universities are also responsible, holding up the numbers of how many students are college bound as a measure of the school's success. "They don't track how many are successful once in college," says Nathan. "Those statistics are abysmal. Many of those kids won't finish college."

The statistics do bear this out. According to American College Testing data, 27 percent of freshmen at four-year institutions failed to return for their sophomore year. Only 45 percent of students who graduated from high school in 1982 and earned at least 10 college credits had received their bachelor's degree by the time they were 30. The odds that a



Eric Simonson, vice president and  
general manager of Sundrella  
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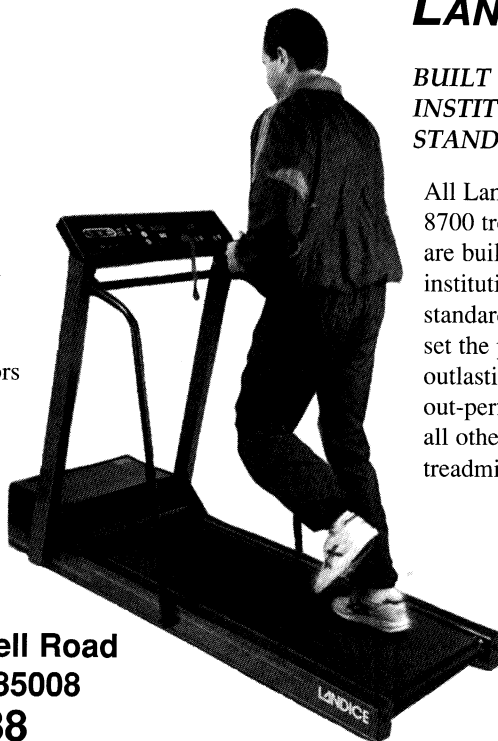


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freshman at a Division 1 university will graduate within 6 years is about 50-50. And at many branch campuses of Division 1 universities, the dropout failure rate is from 70 to the upper 80 percent in six years.

According to Jim Perlow, vice president and general manager of Jet Products Co., Inc., a precision machining company, by the year 2000, 65 percent of the available jobs will require technical skills. Only 20 percent will require university degrees, and 15 percent will be for unskilled laborers. "Nothing," says Perlow, "is being done to address the technically skilled jobs."

Mark Lashinske, production manager of Modern Industries, a custom precision machining and engineering company, agrees. "We need to get past the point of why bikes were made and teach how to build them," he says. "It's nice to have philosophies. You can philosophize why two plus two equals four, and I'm glad you taught me two plus two is four, but what do we use it for?"

It is exactly those questions that concern the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce and those in the manufacturing community. "If our education system is not teaching the relevant skills of today's working world to those students, then it's all for naught," says Bankofier.

Nathan points out just how far reaching the need for technical skills in today's workplace can be. "If you have a firm that does export, all the material they export is usually produced in metric system units (because that is what the European community requires)," he says. "When it's shipped, it's shipped in English units. If you are a dock operator, the reality is you have to be able to make conversions from metric units to English units, which is a fairly sophisticated math problem. It requires reasoning and understanding."

## Follow the Money

The battle over quality education is not complete either with the usual problems of resource allocation, both in terms of money and what is being asked of a classroom teachers in terms of time. "Teachers are being held responsible and accountable for things that take away from their mission of teaching, such as counseling and abuse issues," says Nathan. "Schools are not able to target their resources where the bulk are needed."

Dempster sums it up this way: "In essence, we've got a lower quality student coming in, we've got higher expectations from business, and the schools are left to figure out what to do," says Dempster. "I think their hands are tied."

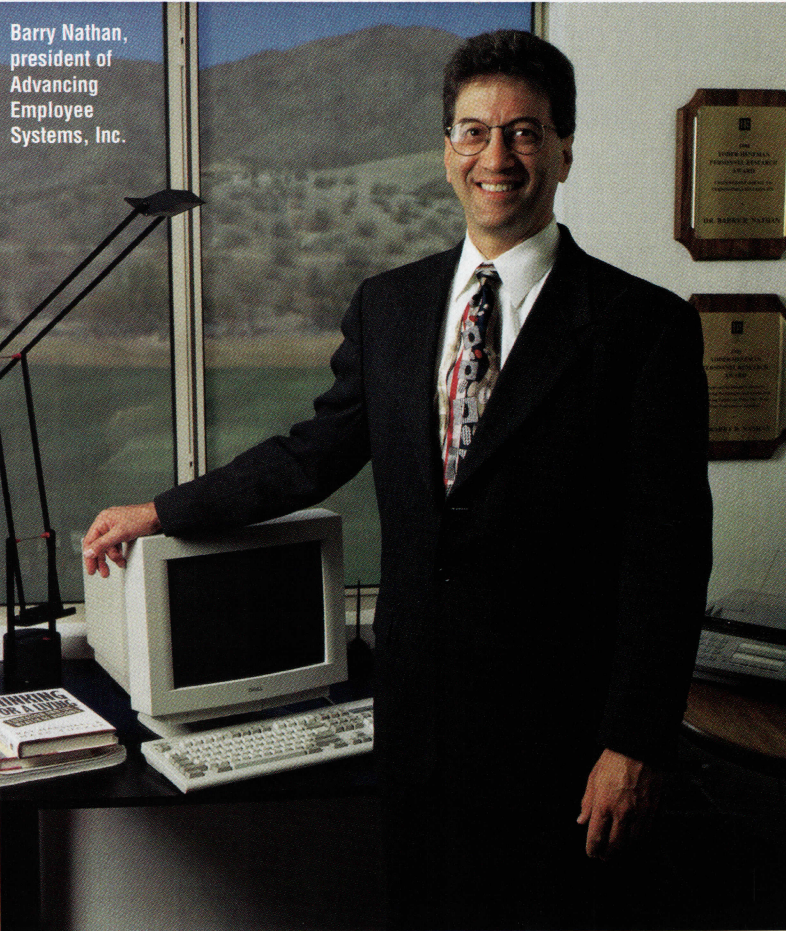
Throwing money at the problem has

never really helped create the kinds of qualified workers that businesses are looking for either, says Dempster. "Last year in corporate America, we spent \$52 billion in classroom instruction and \$180 billion in on-the-job training," he says. "That's \$232 billion. That's only \$10 billion less than the entire public education system."

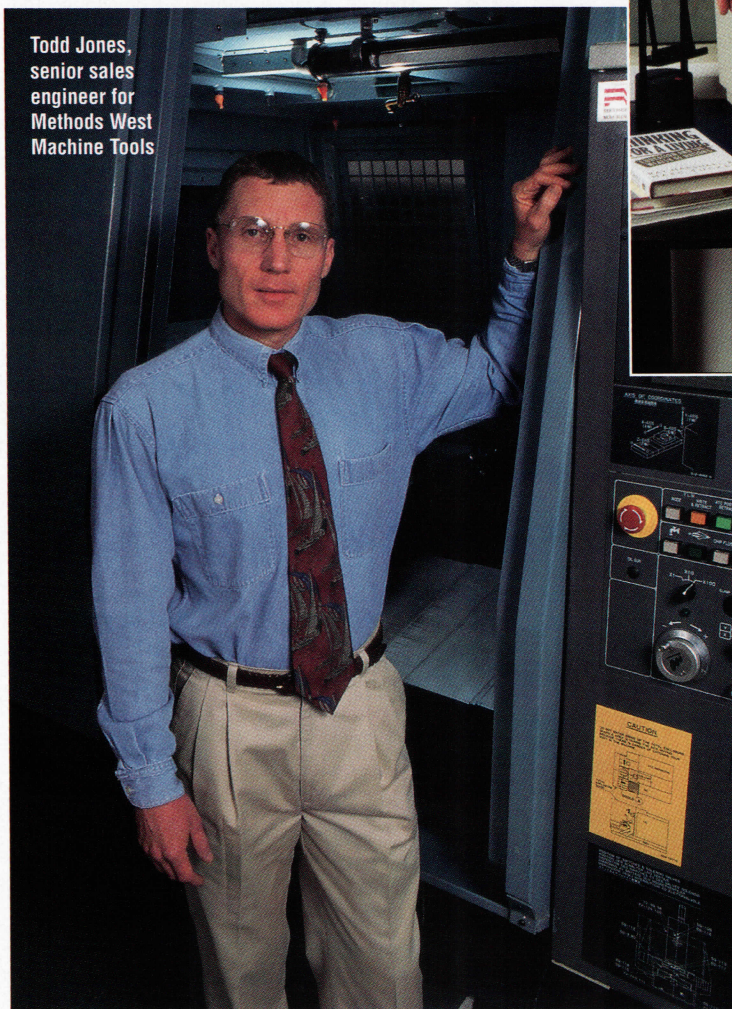
Dempster points out that the seemingly constant funding battles that go on between school districts, taxpayers, and elected officials. "When the state legislature gets together it's like watching kids in a sandbox. They kick sand at each other because they want politics involved in this."

But Dempster asks: What are we attempting to fund? "If we are not happy with what we are getting, why are we continuing to put money into it?" he asks. "We need to redefine what we want from schools. Then and only then should we be talking about money because then it will make sense."

Another issue that business people are taking responsibility for is the lack of marketing in their own industries. Bankofier



Barry Nathan,  
president of  
Advancing  
Employee  
Systems, Inc.



Todd Jones,  
senior sales  
engineer for  
Methods West  
Machine Tools



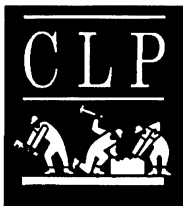
Todd Bankofier, Phoenix  
Chamber of Commerce

says most young people have very limited exposure to the working world and the well-paying opportunities available. Their vision, he argues, is mostly confined to the television, the media, and the magazines and newspapers in stores. "I think the business community has a responsibility of bringing kids into their work place during the course of their high school curriculum and showing them the different opportunities," he says.

Todd Jones, senior sales engineer for Methods West Machine Tools, a manufacturing precision metal company, agrees. "Education's primary ▶

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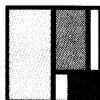
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mission is to prepare kids for college, but our industry is saying you don't need college to be successful in manufacturing," he says. "But that message doesn't get across and that's partly our fault. We don't market ourselves or the opportunities and rewards of this occupation very well at all. And that is one of our great failures."

Perlow places a good deal of responsibility on the methods in which kids are taught in today's school. "Our educational system teaches mainly by seeing and hearing, so those that are kinesthetic learners are left out, shuffled around, or they drop out," he says. "Some of these kids are very bright. They are just bored."

He adds, "They are probably the most informed group of the information age. They play video games all day long, and everything moves so fast for them. And then we sit them in a classroom for a specified amount of time to do a specific amount of work. We lecture to the blackboard and wonder why we lose them."

## Follow the Machines

The cyclical nature of many manufacturing positions is also a problem that contributes to the overall shortage of workers. Precision metalworking is, many times, dominantly tied to the aerospace industry, which is extremely cyclical. "When it's down, companies tend to lay-off, and people don't want to deal with the ups and downs," says Jones. "They tell themselves, 'I want to get into something more stable. I won't earn as much money, but I think I'll have more job security over the long haul.'"

Jones says many also have misconceptions about the manufacturing industry, equating it with being dirty and dangerous, which, he says, is simply not true. Simonson concurs. "You don't have a lot of these kids saying, 'When I grow up, I'm going into manufacturing,'" he says. "It's a well-paying, steady job, but there's not a lot of glitz and glamour to it. It's hard work."

Like many business owners, Bruce Dieffenbach, president of Treffers Precision, Inc., is expanding his work force and having a difficult time finding qualified applicants, either experienced or even at the trainee level. "We're in competition with everyone else, so we're trying to be even more selective than we would normally be," he says. "When we hire someone, we want the right fit. In the last three months, we brought on a group of trainees for a particular job classification, which is not historically what we have done."

Many owners and operators are taking

Dieffenbach's lead. Rather than just putting new hires out on the plant floor in an on-the-job-training basis, they are being given group classroom instruction and job development, which has made a big difference in keeping qualified workers.

And to their credit, education is not blind to what has been happening in the work place. "The school systems have recognized that a problem exists and they are working as hard as they can to fix it," says Nathan. "And the community colleges will gain a greater role in this emerging economy."

What the Chamber's Bankfrier wants to remind us is that everyone at some time in their life is going to hold down a job. "We should be training them so they are capable of carrying out that job once they are in it," he says.

Dempster whole-heartedly agrees. "Everyone will eventually be working," he says. "Why don't we start building into the school system the approach of helping people understand what's required when they leave school? I'm talking about being able to communicate in written and oral (forms), team problem solving, things that are critical in the work place. We are not focusing on those things in the education system."

## Follow the Example

But some schools are having a great deal of success. Dempster asks us to look at those schools and see that invariably their success is predicated on the foundation of clearly identified outcomes. He cites the Alhambra Elementary School District as one example. "(Superintendent Carol Peck) has one of the top scoring schools in the state. And yet, she is in one of the most impoverished areas," says Dempster. "How do you explain that? It comes from leadership and seeking out partnerships that will make a difference in outcomes."

The business community is beginning to recognize the importance of clearly defined outcomes, as well. The Chamber of Commerce is asking its members to keep the outcomes it is looking for in mind. "The business community needs to go to the schools and have the teachers ask, 'What kind of product do you want?'" says Bankfrier. "Then the business community needs to deliver the specifications."

Some companies, to be sure, will continue taking a short-sighted look at the labor problem and temporarily Band-Aid over the labor dilemma with short-term solutions. Simonson cites a perfect example of a manufacturing company down the street from his who stood outside the gates of a competitor on payday and offered the employees a dollar more an hour to start on

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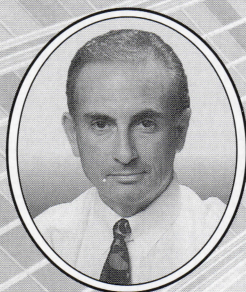
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Monday. "That company was down 40 people overnight," says Simonson.

But such tactics won't last for long. Sundrella, which is building a new facility at 27th Avenue and Deer Valley, has a lower turnover rate than many of its competitors, and Simonson attributes this to the clear-cut and high expectations it asks of its employees. In return, the company pays well and extends loyalty and respect for its work force.

"We let them know what is expected, we reward them monetarily, and we treat them with respect," he says. "We give them an upwardly mobile path, and we train them so they can make more money."

Simonson recalls a few short years ago when the economy wasn't quite so vibrant and companies were laying people off. "We didn't do that," he says. "We don't staff up heavy in our busy season and then lay off in the off season. If we hire someone, we expect them to work year round."

And that business policy seems to work in a notoriously transient industry. Sundrella's welders average 10 to 11 years on the job. There are no easy answers for the labor shortage problem, here in the state or around the country.

But as Bankofier says, the business community is not as engaged in the educational community as it needs to be. To have a qualified and trained work force in the future, business will have to become engaged. Bankofier would like community leaders and business people to start with something as small as knowing what school district you are in. "Do you know the members of your school board?" he asks. "Have you ever had the principal over for lunch?" When he asks businesses these questions, the answer, he says, is always a resounding "No."

"They should at least know where their tax money is going," he says.

"It's going to take persistent and determined effort to turn this situation around," adds Jones. "But we have to do it or we won't have any employees. We are not going to do something as a country until we get to a crisis point. And we are on the verge of it right now."

Still, most are optimistic the gap will lessen and that Arizona will eventually see the light and make the corrections needed to right the path. "We are always a little bit late getting started, and then we gear up and do tremendous things," says Nathan. "But we always seem to come through."



Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe free-lance writer