

Boston Business Journal - September 13, 2010
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Boston Business Journal

Friday, September 10, 2010

Manufacturing is showing signs of life

Boston Business Journal - by [Lisa van der Pool](#)

Smokestacks may be long gone as the symbol of manufacturing in Massachusetts, an industry that was among the hardest hit during the recession.

But products like solar panels and robotic medical devices are fast-becoming a beacon of hope for the sector, which has seen renewed job growth this year. The state has added more than 5,300 manufacturing jobs during the past six months, and in July alone added 2,800 manufacturing positions, according to the **Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development**.

Last year was a different story as the state lost approximately 18,700 manufacturing jobs, according to the **Manufacturing Extension Partnership** in Worcester.

There are currently about 255,000 manufacturing jobs in the state, down from 272,000 in January of 2009. For perspective, there were approximately 391,000 manufacturing jobs in the state in June of 2001.

Although many of those jobs will be lost forever, they are being replaced, at least in part, by jobs that are being fueled by the innovative economy.

Historically, most manufacturing jobs didn't require college degrees. But as low-skill manufacturing work has been shipped overseas, new manufacturing job growth is being created by new technologies churned out by the state's medical device, high-tech and defense industries. Those jobs more often than not require skilled workers, with college or technical degrees. Often the work is so high-level and has so many **FDA**-imposed controls, that it doesn't make sense to move operations overseas.

The new job numbers highlight that the "bottom has been reached," in terms of manufacturing job loss, said Jack Healy, director of the Manufacturing Extension Partnership. "The growth coming back has been primarily in durable goods. It shows people are making investments in equipment."

The largest manufacturing sub-sector is electrical, with medical devices, pharmaceuticals and food and beverage sectors on the upswing and textiles, paper and printing on the decline, according to Healy.

The growth is also positive sign for the state's economy.

Lawrence-based **Solectria Renewables** LLC, which manufactures power inverters for solar photovoltaic panels, has added about 15 people during the past two months. Those jobs include assembly technicians and quality control staffers, among others.

Anita Worden, co-founder of the 66-person firm, which will most likely double in size this year in terms of staffing levels, says her firm is working hard to keep up with demand, which is being driven by a mushrooming desire among home owners and building developers to install energy efficient solar panels.

Worden is proud of keeping her manufacturing operation in the state and says it doesn't make sense for her firm to send manufacturing overseas.

"We're in a different market and I think that's where hopefully Massachusetts can take the lead. We've got the skills and knowledge," said Worden. "The high-tech manufacturing industry is where we have the opportunity to grow."

Cleantech, as well as defense and medical device manufacturing have also driven hiring this year at **Coghlin Companies Inc.**, a fourth-generation privately held contract manufacturer in Worcester. In 2008 the company experienced a slowdown in orders, had layoffs and weathered a challenging time, according to President and CEO Chris Coghlin.

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During the past several years Coghlin Companies expanded the type of technology businesses it serves, beyond just the wireless and semiconductor industries, into defense, medical devices and clean tech. The firm specializes in working with everything from startup companies, to companies that are doing about \$20 million in revenue.

The firm has added about 100 people since last year, growing to about 280 staffers. Coghlin said sales are expected to exceed \$100 million this year.

And the company is hiring.

“I’m optimistic about our business because of the technologies we’re involved in, because some are world-changing technologies,” said Coghlin.

Indeed, one of those companies with potentially ground-breaking technology is Cambridge-based **Myomo Inc.**, a medical device firm that develops personal robotic devices that can be used by stroke victims to help them regain lost arm movement.

The technology, which was initially spun out of MIT, can help stroke victims even if it has been years since the stroke, CEO Steve Kelly said.

The firm outsources its manufacturing to Coghlin Companies, rather than overseas, in part because the company needs to maintain the correct level of manufacturing controls which are required by the FDA.

“(Coghlin) fills a really interesting niche,” said Kelly.

“I think it bodes well for the Massachusetts economy that there’s a growing number of interesting medical device firms,” he said. “Pretty much everything about (manufacturing such devices) makes sense to do it locally.”

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