

Building a Highly Skilled Workforce

Wood-Products Manufacturing in Northern New England

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A new skills-development and credentialing program aims to benefit workers and employers while bolstering an important part of the rural New England economy.

Wood-products manufacturing has been important to the northern New England economy for centuries. In this century, however, foreign competition and the recession, among other factors, have squeezed the industry—and the employment prospects for woodworkers.

Nevertheless, the region still includes many hundreds of small to midsize wood-products manufacturers, employing more than 13,000 people.¹ In the heavily forested states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, with 75–85 percent timberland, these companies have an important role to play. (See “Wood-Products Manufacturing Jobs in Northern New England.”)

U.S. manufacturing overall is experiencing a skills gap. The 2011 report “Boiling Point? The Skills Gap in U.S. Manufacturing” provided insight into just how seriously manufacturers are viewing the challenge.² Respondents to a survey of 1,123 manufacturing executives indicated that a “highly skilled, flexible workforce” was the most important element in business success. More than two-thirds of those surveyed expected the shortage of skilled production workers to get worse over the next three to five years.

Leaders of wood-products companies in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont believe a skills gap is partly the result of an aging workforce and a dearth of younger workers. Federal Reserve



top Henry Kober, right, of DCI, discusses the training initiative with Scott Nelson, Woodwork Career Alliance.

bottom Making furniture at DCI Lisbon, New Hampshire.

photo Northern Forest Center

Wood-Products Manufacturing Jobs in Northern New England

Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Annual
2003	12112	11863	11967	11943	11891	11894	11959	12059	11932	11813	11802	11901	11928
2004	11873	11792	11931	12140	12248	12386	12315	12474	12466	12298	12181	12213	12193
2005	11912	11847	11951	12112	12117	12236	12047	12104	11942	11801	11740	11734	11962
2006	11285	11312	11398	11516	11585	11552	11344	11387	11169	10974	10762	10768	11254
2007	10368	10353	10540	10764	10885	11067	10849	10952	10812	10794	10773	10777	10744
2008	10199	9992	9784	9831	9789	9929	9907	9823	9605	9240	8971	8669	9645
2009	7897	7560	7492	7580	7683	7800	7823	7694	7647	7660	7654	7502	7667
2010	7237	7168	7330	7480	7669	7685	7681	7674	7649	7543	7479	7492	7507
2011	7454	7535	7626	7506	7562	7589	7582	7584	7498	7462	7472	7476	7529
2012	7246	7283	7426	7485	7597	7687	7616	7668	7681	7646	7598	7574	7542
2013	7464	7558	7623	7757	7952	8048							

Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor.

Bank of Boston research predicts nearly stagnant population growth among working-age people (25–64) in New England between 2009 and 2019, with northern New England’s worker population growing by only 1.3 percent.³ Unfortunately, although some manufacturing industries have active skills-certification systems, there is as yet no industry-accepted system with significant experience in credentialing employees of wood-products companies.

Standards and Credentialing

A new program aims to change that with a training and credentialing program that will help the industry improve the overall quality of its workforce and position wood manufacturing as a promising career path.

The Northern Forest Center, a nonprofit organization that advocates for the region and helps its communities benefit from forest-based economic and conservation initiatives, has partnered with the nonprofit Woodwork Career Alliance of North America (WCA) to pioneer the Woodwork Passport program.⁴

In addition to working closely with educational and training institutions at the secondary and postsecondary levels to help align their programs with the needs of the wood-products manufacturing industry, the Center’s Skilled Workforce Initiative for Wood Manufacturing is breaking new ground by collaborating one-on-one with manufacturers.⁵ (See “Goals of the Skilled Workforce Initiative for Wood Manufacturing.”) It is also partnering with several industry trade associations, including the Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association, the Maine Wood Products Association, and the Architectural Woodwork Institute.

The Skilled Workforce Initiative is designed to benefit both workers and employers. By helping the industry to build the highly skilled workforce that is essential to compete successfully in the global marketplace, the program expects to provide jobs that are crucial to a rural economy and expand the role of the sector in the region.

Workers in the wood-products manufacturing industry generally don’t have a four-year degree, and many don’t have any postsec-

ondary education. For them, employment opportunities in northern New England are often in retail or in leisure and hospitality services. Average weekly wages in the wood-products manufacturing industry in the three states are more than 40 percent higher than for retail, and about double the average weekly wage in leisure and hospitality. Yet the industry lags well behind the average for manufacturing in these states.⁶ The hope is that the credentialing program will help elevate the status of woodworking from a job to a profession, while enhancing industry competitiveness, and ultimately increasing wages.



Sanding a seat at Newport Furniture Parts in northern Vermont.

Training the Next Generation

As workers advance through the credentialing and training program—which covers skill standards on 55 machines and essential tools for today’s wood-products manufacturing industry—evaluators will document their proficiency in a Woodwork Passport, a portable and permanent record that stays with woodworkers throughout their career. The passport is the result of WCA’s work with industry professionals to develop a skills-testing system that could certify woodworkers at basic, intermediate, or advanced levels on each machine.

Wood-products companies are continually being encouraged to join the program. They must first prepare a detailed company profile identifying specific credentialing and training needs. The Center and WCA will aggregate the information from the profiles to help educational institutions tailor their training programs to align with industry demand.

Initial response from northern New England educational and training institutions has been positive. In the secondary education system, a key focus will be the Career and Technical Education Centers in each state. In the postsecondary world, partner institutions will include Eastern Maine Community College, White Mountains Community College, and the Vermont Woodworking School. The institutions plan to meet the demand for state-of-the-art training equipment in various ways, some by purchasing equipment and others by partnering with local manufacturers.

Over the next three years, the skills initiative aims to work with more than 30 companies and more than 300 employees and students, issuing Woodwork Passports and evaluating participants for competence with machine and tool operations. If successful, this initiative will demonstrate the practical value of the program and lead to more implementation by the industry and the educational community.

Several wood-products manufacturers have taken the initial step of signing up for a detailed company profile. Their willingness to be the first New England manufacturers to work with the new program speaks to the challenges they face in hiring.

“The work is out there, but if we can’t recruit, train, and retain a skilled workforce, our opportunities for growth are more limited,” says Kevin Hastings, owner and president of Colchester Vermont’s Amoskeag Woodworking, producer of

The Skilled Workforce Initiative for Wood Manufacturing: Goals

- Assist wood products companies in hiring, training, retaining, and promoting workers with needed skills.
- Enable education and training institutions to better connect training opportunities with the needs of wood-products companies, thereby better targeting training dollars and increasing job placements.
- Create a better career path for workers in a recognized and valued profession that will provide incentives for training, increase opportunities for well-paying jobs, and attract new talent to the wood-products industry.
- Help position the industry to remain vibrant and economically competitive for the future, thus sustaining and creating thousands of jobs.



Touring corporate-furniture company WallGoldfinger in Randolph, Vermont.

custom paneling, flooring, molding, and the like. “This program will significantly advance the woodworking sector in our area, and we’re looking forward to the possibilities it brings us.”

If successful, the Skilled Workforce Initiative will send positive economic ripples through the wood-products manufacturing sector and the region’s economy. Participating companies will see improvement in the quality of their workforce, their products, and their financial viability. Vibrant wood-products companies will enable the growth and retention of quality job opportunities in the region, which will stimulate the economy, help to stabilize rural communities, and enhance the health of the forest.

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Endnotes

¹ For information on public and private land with harvest-size timber that is not designated as undevelopable wilderness, see <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/Research/data/specmap/us02-11.cfm>. The employment number is based on aggregated data from three reports published by the North East State Foresters Association. See *The Economic Importance of Maine’s Forest-Based Economy 2013*; *The Economic Importance of New Hampshire’s Forest-Based Economy 2013*; and *The Economic Importance of Vermont’s Forest-Based Economy 2013*, <http://www.nefainfo.org>. Wood-products manufacturers tend to fall into North American Industry Classification codes 321 (wood-products manufacturing) and 337 (furniture and related product manufacturing). The Skilled Workforce Initiative serves a subset of all wood-products companies, known as secondary wood-products manufacturing. See http://www.northernforest.org/skilled_workforce_initiative.html.

² Tom Morrison et al, “Boiling Point? The Skills Gap in U.S. Manufacturing” (white paper, Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute, September 2011), <http://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/-/media/A07730B2A798437D98501E798C2E13AA.ashx>.

³ Julia Dennett and Alicia Sasser Modestino, “The Middle-Skills Gap: Ensuring an Adequate Supply of Skilled Labor in Northern and Southern New England” (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Policy Brief 11-1, April 2011).

⁴ The Northern Forest stretches nearly 400 miles from New York’s Tug Hill Plateau and Adirondack Mountains, across Lake Champlain and Vermont’s northern Green Mountains and Northeast Kingdom, New Hampshire’s North Country and White Mountains, and Maine’s Western Mountains, Highlands, St. John Valley, and Downeast Lakes to the border with Canada. The region is home to 2 million people. See http://www.northernforest.org/about_the_northern_forest.html.

⁵ The Skilled Workforce Initiative for Wood Manufacturing is delivered through the Regional Wood Products Consortium, a collaboration between the Northern Forest Center and the wood-products manufacturing industry in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and northern New York. It is supported by funding from Vermont’s Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, the Canaday Family Charitable Trust, Citizens Bank, the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (as part of the Rural Jobs and Innovation Accelerator Challenge), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development through a Rural Business Opportunity Grant. The Architectural

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⁶ Data compiled from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor.

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