

The 2026 Career Advancement in Manufacturing Report

Bridging the Discovery Gap



We are pleased to release the findings of the sixth annual Career Advancement in Manufacturing Survey, produced in partnership with Women in Manufacturing.

The data in this year's report highlight a significant "discovery gap" in our industry. While our workforce reports record-high levels of confidence and career satisfaction, the majority of these professionals didn't set out to join the manufacturing industry – they fell into those careers by chance.

The future success of manufacturing depends on closing the discovery gap by transforming the high satisfaction found within the industry into a visible, intentional narrative that reaches the next generation of women before they choose their path. We can bridge this gap by leaning into mentorship and sponsorship – creating a network of support and advocacy for women and new talent. By making our tech-driven roles and high levels of satisfaction more visible, we can move manufacturing from a career of chance to a career of choice.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2026 REPORT:

Bright Future

90% of workers are optimistic about the industry's direction.

Strong Advocacy

82% of employees would recommend a career in manufacturing.

Female Optimism

91% of women are confident in the industry's future, compared to 76% of men.

Hiring Trends

74% of respondents report experiencing labor shortages, down from 83% in recent years.

Valued Workforce

Among men and women, more than 80% feel recognized and valued by their employers.

We invite you to read, share, and incorporate the insights from this report into your own workforce development and recruitment strategies.

Let's work together to ensure that the stability and recognition found within our industry today are visible to everyone looking for a rewarding path forward.

Sincerely,



Allison Roberts Grealis

President and Founder, Women in Manufacturing Association



Rachel Zepernick

General Manager, Thomas

Record Satisfaction in Today's Manufacturing Workforce

A record **90% of workers believe manufacturing has a bright future**, according to the sixth annual Career Advancement in Manufacturing Survey. The optimism continues, with **82% of respondents recommending a career in manufacturing**. Together, these numbers demonstrate that manufacturing continues to be a highly rewarding path for the workforce at large.

This perspective is reinforced by a significant **81% of the total workforce** who feel valued by their employers. Regardless of how a worker entered the industry or what their specific role is, the vast majority feel their work is recognized and valued by their employers.



90%
of workers believe manufacturing has a bright future

Manufacturing Employees Say the Industry Has a Bright Future



WHAT WORKERS LIKE ABOUT MANUFACTURING

When looking at why workers are so quick to recommend the industry, a clear narrative of personal and professional fulfillment emerges.

Manufacturing career advocates cited career growth (73%), challenging, problem-solving work (71%), and long-term stability (61%) as their primary motivators. Almost 60% highlight the importance of competitive wages and benefits.

The data also show a slight shift in priorities between the front office and the production line.

- Shop floor workers find their greatest satisfaction in problem-solving (84%), career growth (63%), and industry stability (61%).
- Management prioritizes the long-term trajectory of career growth (80%), while still placing high value on problem-solving (74%) and stability (59%).

Regardless of the specific task at hand, the collective focus remains on solving complex challenges and building a stable, high-growth future together. When asked what they liked about working in manufacturing, respondents replied:

*"Ability to be **involved in creating something** that people can touch."*

*"**Trades are needed**, and overlooked! Pick a trade and learn as you go."*

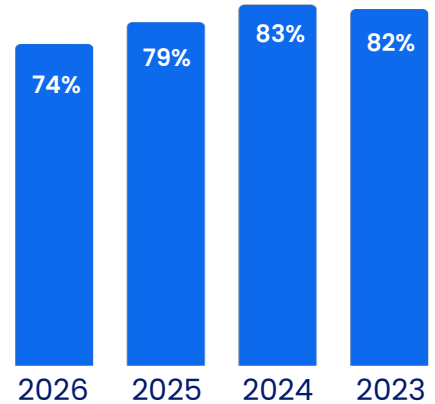
*"Help the United States become more **self-reliant** in manufacturing."*

*"**Job security** – things always need to be built."*

Tackling Labor Shortages

Labor shortages have persisted for years, but the tide appears to be turning slightly: **74% of this year's respondents reported labor shortages in 2026, down from 83% in 2024.** The hardest positions to fill are entry-level production (43%) and maintenance, repair, and operations (MRO) positions (38%), consistent with past data.

Labor Shortages Over Time



The impact of the labor gap varies by company size: 82% of small- to medium-sized (499 employees or fewer) companies report labor shortages, compared with 73% of larger companies.

Hardest-to-Fill Technical Roles



Many workers remain optimistic about the evolving technology landscape, including AI and automation, with 33% of respondents who recommend a career in manufacturing doing so specifically because of the opportunity to work with advanced technologies.

WHAT WORKERS THINK OF AI

Among shop floor workers, the percentage who recommend a career in manufacturing specifically because of the opportunity to work with advanced technologies rises to 36%, suggesting that many on the manufacturing front lines see automation as a way to modernize their roles rather than eliminate them.



EXPECTATIONS FOR AI AND AUTOMATION:

*"AI specialists will be needed to ethically incorporate, guide, and manage AI solutions in the workplace. [We will need] **specialized roles to understand and maintain robotic and other automation initiatives.**"*

*"It will be bleak if we cannot meet the **skills gap** that is growing due to the rapid advancement of technology in the manufacturing process."*

*"I think we are still going to see a lot of AI, which will **open up lots of technical roles.**"*

*"This future is especially well-suited for women — because the work is increasingly about **precision, creativity, digital fluency, and leadership** rather than brute force."*

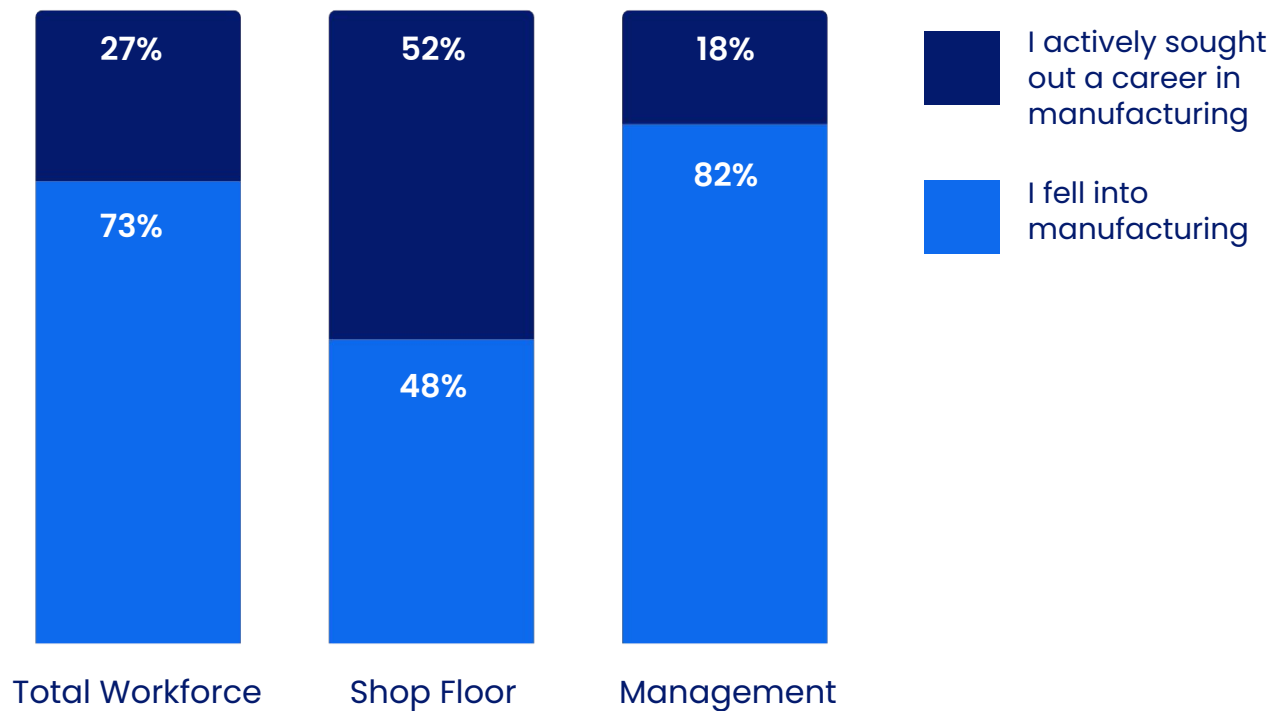
*"With AI and robotics we'll see less people doing hands-on work and shifting to **higher-level skill positions and support for new technologies.**"*

Unexpected Starts Give Way to High Career Satisfaction

The majority of professionals currently in manufacturing did not originally plan to be in the industry. However, there is a significant divide in intentionality when comparing shop floor workers to management.

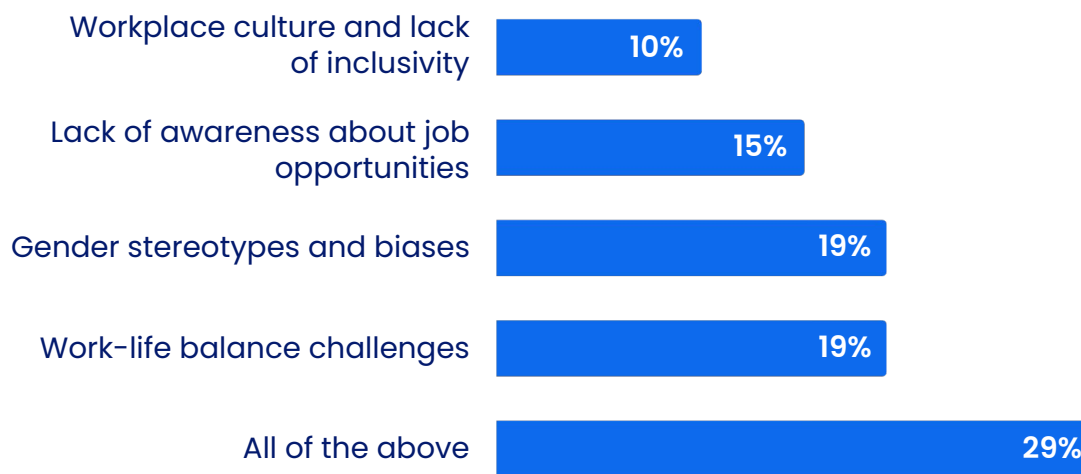
More than 8 out of 10 managers did not start their careers with the intention of working in manufacturing, which suggests that manufacturing often recruits its leadership from other sectors or backgrounds. Meanwhile, **52% of shop floor workers intentionally sought out manufacturing careers**, which suggests that technical workers join the industry with much higher intent, likely due to specialized trade schooling or STEM degrees.

The "Discovery Gap": Accidental Entry into Manufacturing



Thirty-five percent of men enter the field intentionally, compared to 23% of women. Women noted a broad range of barriers to joining the industry, including work-life balance challenges, gender stereotypes, and a lack of awareness about opportunities. Almost one-third of respondents ranked “all of the above,” suggesting that it is a combination of all the systemic challenges women face that creates the greatest barrier to entry.

Biggest Barriers to Women Joining Manufacturing



Notably, those who “fall into” manufacturing careers are just as satisfied with their careers as those who intentionally seek them out. **For those who did not seek out manufacturing careers, 80% would recommend a career in manufacturing, and 81% feel valued in their careers.** This signals that the industry’s inherent benefits, including job stability and career advancement opportunities, are strong enough to overcome an initial lack of intent and transform “accidental” employees into long-term advocates for the field.

The high satisfaction levels among those who “fell into” manufacturing reveal a significant “discovery gap.” For many, the industry’s greatest benefits often remain a secret until they are already on the job. To tackle labor shortages, we have to turn this internal optimism into a powerful recruitment story.

The Evolution of Benefits and Mentorship

Once people are in the manufacturing field, what motivates them to stay? How do we help women, in particular, grow in manufacturing careers? Satisfaction and the belief that the industry has a bright future can be major motivators. Aligning benefits with workers' values can also go a long way to boost recruitment and retention.

Respondents ranked the most desirable benefits as flexible work schedules, health insurance, and 401k matches. While most manufacturers offer health insurance and 401k matches (96% and 93% respectively), flexible work schedules are less common. Only 59% of respondents have access to flexible work schedules, which was the top-ranked benefit among respondents, more desirable than even health insurance.

The data suggest that flexible schedules could be a key driver of both recruitment and retention for current employees. This could take different forms:

- Compressed workweeks (e.g., four 10-hour shifts)
- Shift-swapping platforms that allow workers to manage their own schedules
- Staggered or flexible start/end times to accommodate personal needs



Respondents offered suggestions for flexible options in their workplaces:

"[The] production team worked 4 10's and admin worked 5 8's. This left **Fridays for collaboration with production management** [and] leadership. Or, longer weekdays and short Fridays."

"I work in assembly (and I am the **ONLY** assembler) at a small company, so **as long as I meet deadlines and work 40 hours a week** (I'm on salary), **the time I start does not matter.**"

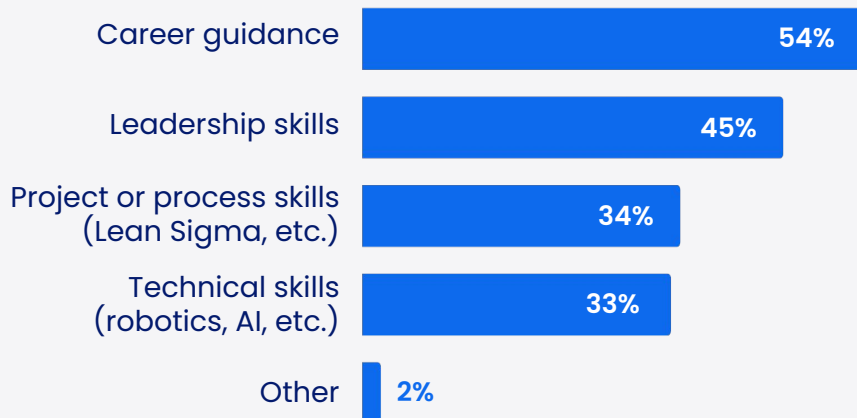
"With having 3 shifts and working 7 days a week, they **let production pick who works the weekend** and has their days off during the week."

"We do **half-day Fridays** when running well, and give **comp days for weekends worked / on call.**"

MENTORSHIP GOALS: WHAT WORKERS WANT

Mentorship is another way to create strong ties and motivate within the industry. Many are looking for professional networking and technical growth. Notably, many are seeking programs that can be integrated into their standard work hours.

Mentorship Goals



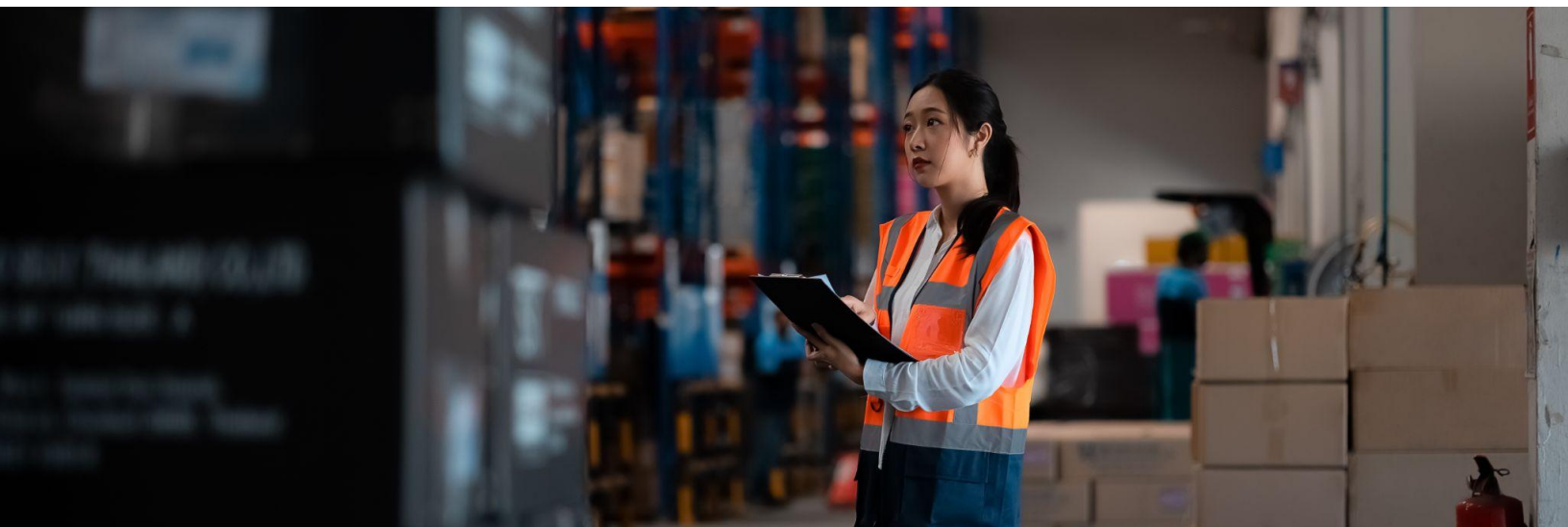
More than 60% of respondents stated that dedicated time for mentorship during work hours is essential. Many are also looking for a formal pairing system (55%) and face-to-face sessions at their workplaces (37%).

Practical recommendations for mentorship programs include:

- Integrate them into workdays. Avoid making mentorship an "after-hours" activity.
- Include networking. Focus on "who you know" as well as "what you know."
- Leverage video for the shop floor: Shop floor workers were 14% more interested in short video or recorded content than other formats.

Some comments highlighted the need to evolve mentorship beyond simple advice, calling for a more intentional form of sponsorship and community building. Workplaces should consider expanding beyond passive mentorship to foster active sponsorship. Sponsorship involves not just sharing knowledge but actively advocating for colleagues in high-level rooms, stopping interruptions in meetings, and making sure that technical workers are introduced to the influential circles that drive the industry forward.

Overall, respondents expressed a desire for human-centered relationships to help them move ahead, especially as technology takes on a more prominent role. As one survey respondent said, "Many jobs will be automated with AI [and] robot technology. Relationships in the workplace will need to be more human-centered and strive towards inclusivity and working as a team."



Conclusion

To close the "discovery gap," we must transform the high satisfaction of our current workforce into an intentional recruitment story that reaches the next generation of women. By prioritizing on-the-clock mentorship and flexible work models, we can translate internal stability into a visible and attractive career path. Ultimately, we should aim to harness this record-high optimism to make sure that manufacturing is no longer a career stumbled upon by chance, but a career destination of its own.

METHODOLOGY

All data points are sourced from a joint survey conducted by Xometry, Thomas, and Women in Manufacturing. The insights presented are Xometry's own, based on this data. The survey was conducted in January 2026 and included 1,022 qualified North American respondents. Respondents included manufacturing employees from small, medium, and large companies in manufacturing, located within North America.

ABOUT XOMETRY

Xometry's (NASDAQ: XMTR) AI-native marketplace, popular Thomasnet® industrial sourcing platform and suite of cloud-based services are rapidly digitizing the manufacturing industry. Xometry provides manufacturers the critical resources they need to grow their business and streamlines the procurement process for buyers through real-time pricing and lead time data. Learn more at xometry.com or [follow Xometry on LinkedIn](#).



ABOUT THOMAS

Thomas is the definitive supplier discovery and advertising platform, connecting buyers with thousands of highly vetted suppliers and helping manufacturers grow their businesses. For more information, visit thomasnet.com.



ABOUT WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING

The Women in Manufacturing Association (WiM) is a national and global trade association dedicated to supporting, promoting and inspiring women who have chosen a career in the manufacturing industry. It provides year-round support to more than 35,000 individual members representing more than 3,000 manufacturing companies from 50 US states and more than 75 countries. WiM encompasses manufacturers of all types and welcomes individuals from every job function – from production to the C-Suite. Membership is available to anyone working within or with the manufacturing sector. Visit womeninmanufacturing.org.

