

Made in America!

“Made in America” represents quality, variety, and domestic production for domestic jobs. Manufacturing in America is much more than cars and trucks, socks and shirts. Manufacturing jobs span a huge range of products that we use every day, and that we export every day: musical instruments, paper products, food, toys, bicycles, laundry products, appliances, sporting equipment, hats, cookware, plumbing fixtures, newspapers, greeting cards, beverages, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, heavy equipment & machinery, games, furniture, carpeting, precision tools, herbs and spices, tools, petroleum products, plastics, glass, gas pumps, and school busses to name just a few.

John Ratzenberger, host of the TV show *Made in America*, recently spoke at the annual MARTS Conference in Chicago. Mr. Ratzenberger came into many American households on the TV show *Cheers* as the “know-it-all” mailman Cliff Claven and has been the voice of characters in nine Pixar animated films (*Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, *Cars*, and *WALL-E* just to name a few). The TV show *Made in America* aired for five seasons on the Travel Channel from 2004 through 2008 and explored how the American workers drive an often overlooked share of our nation’s economic well being.

During the nearly 100 *Made in America* episodes, Mr. Ratzenberger explored behind the scenes in more than 240 businesses. (Selected episodes are available on DVD, and [some can be viewed online](#).) His passion for American manufacturing and the unsung choruses of the American workforce should inspire our nation. John went on to co-found [Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs Foundation](#) (NBTF), a charitable organization dedicated to introducing young people to the pleasures of tinkering. When asked about why manufacturing jobs go unfilled because of shortages of skilled workers, he stated:

“Part of the problem is the media and Hollywood often portray manufacturing in a poor light, denigrating anyone who works with their hands.”

Hollywood movies often portray manufacturing plants as dark and dirty, hot and humid. The workers in the films are often scruffy-looking characters with rags in their pockets or a tool-belt around their waist. This is not American manufacturing.

Media, often in a feeding frenzy for new stories, tell the horror stories about someone who was wronged or a catastrophic accident that killed and maimed a bunch of workers. If that’s all we see and read about in the news, then we start believing that is what’s going on in all American industry. That’s wrong!

Politicians can also add to the gloomy side of American manufacturing when trumpeting “manufacturing job loss” and their campaign promises to restore the long lost jobs. The facts point to some historical job losses to foreign countries. But a lion’s share of job losses going back to the 1950s through 2009 are “productivity improvements” that replace labor with advanced manufacturing technologies. These same technologies often require more highly skilled and higher paid employees to maintain and repair the new machines. This is where our skills gaps and skills shortages rise to the surface: Our schools, our graduates, our younger workers are notT educated and trained in what it now takes to work in modern manufacturing plants. That’s the real loss!

Statistics: Our country seems to be run on data and statistics. I learned long ago that data alone does not tell the whole story. I also learned that statistics can be contrived to make just about any point sound true and factual. For example, the historical “manufacturing job loss” statistics paint an inaccurate picture of the manufacturing powerhouse that we are. Consider this: Productivity improvement through advanced manufacturing technologies have eliminated quite a number of unskilled and semi-skilled workers (labor)

of past decades. As unfortunate as lost jobs are, training and up-skilling these workers often fails to grow the needed jobs. Also, consider this: Domestic outsourced non-production jobs from manufacturing businesses often end up in the services industrial sector. As companies trim back their operations, they often outsource indirect manufacturing jobs: engineering, accounting, information systems, marketing, warehousing, grounds keeping, and maintenance. These jobs leave the manufacturing sector and end up in other non-manufacturing and service sectors as tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor and the government's North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). But the manufacturing companies still use their services. That's not real job loss.

When you put these four pieces together (Hollywood, media, politicians and statistics), it makes for a pretty pathetic looking picture that bears little resemblance to our nation's manufacturing reality. Movies, media, politicians, and statistics provide images, stories, and rhetoric that can convince our youth, our school boards, our teachers, our business decision makers, and our governmental leaders that we are in a world of hurt—when in reality we are not that bad. And if there is anything wrong, we more than likely created the problem. If we created the problem in U.S. manufacturing, then we should be able to solve it.

In his book *We've Got It Made in America*, co-authored by Joel Engel in 2006, John Ratzenberger tells stories about his experiences in making the "*Made in America*" TV shows punctuated with stories from his growing up years and throughout his adult life. Growing up in the factory town of Bridgeport, Connecticut in a family of factory workers sets the foundation for many of his life stories. He relates what it was like growing up with a family and neighbors who had real skills:

“If Dad didn't know how to fix something, a neighbor would come over to do it. Everybody had a useful hobby—like welding or boat building or radio tinkering. In school, we said the Pledge of Allegiance; and in summer, we marched in parades on streets festooned with American flags.... Well, I'm sorry to say that the America I grew up in hardly seems to exist anymore in some places.”

The 26 chapters in *We've Got It Made in America* tell quite a story. Some are hilarious. Some make you think. Some make you hang your head as an American. Here are three chapter highlights that hit home:

Seven Six Lessons I've Learned (So Far)

This chapter reflects on three seasons of factory visits. His fourth lesson is this: “The more the company brass knows about their employees, the happier the factory floor is going to be.” In these factories, he saw people who “were proud of what they're making.” In the not-so-happy factories, people seemed to be “least congenial” and “least productive.” The summary of his fourth lesson was “It's plain common sense that workers are happier when they're acknowledged and valued as human beings who have real lives; and a happy workforce is a productive workforce; and a productive workforce brings greater profits to the company.”

Thinking Outside the Big Box

This chapter obviously targets the mega-chain stores but also hits on the “Made in China” part of our economy. “Our appetite for low prices is what keeps those Chinese factories humming” couldn't be further from the truth. But then he links the “big box” trends to the “decline in our education system” here in America: “Over the past twenty years, but particularly in the last ten, control of the curriculum has shifted toward Washington in almost exactly the same way that the local retailing has been replaced by mass merchants. Our public schools are not making the grade—and that's not just measured by what our kids don't know about reading and math. Improved test scores may make good headlines, but it's shortsighted and ultimately futile gesture if your children can't think for themselves.” Our kids do not

have shop classes or relevant career education any more. They are not prepared for the skilled jobs and careers that have been going begging in America for two generations so far especially in manufacturing and wide-spread maintenance jobs.

One Nation

In his final chapter, Ratzenberger reminds the reader about how important our children's self esteem is and how much fear gets in the way of life. His final paragraph hits close to home when reflecting back to September 11, 2001: "I remembered how, in the midst of all that fear and anger, we had come together as one—because underneath it all, we really are one country. Sure, in the best of times—uneventful times—maybe we act like siblings who can barely tolerate each other. But when something happens, the blood thickens real fast. And that's what counts. And that's what will always, always, always bridge all the great divides between us." Why can't we come together to make American manufacturing strong? Where's the fear and anger?

What is it going to take to wake up America? Reading John Ratzenberger's book and seeing the companies featured in the TV series *Made in America* gets me fired up (again!). Our skills shortages, our job loss, our productivity, and our top economy in the world are being seriously undermined by greed, ignorance, and half-truths. Here's an example:

You've heard about how the world's economic and political leaders have "bailed out" the country of Greece that has fallen on desperate economic times. Look at the gross domestic product (GDP) facts: **Greece** is 26th in the world with \$355,876,000 (U.S. dollars equivalent) comparable to the state of **Massachusetts** with \$351,514,000 who ranks 13th in the US in state GDP. By comparison **Saudi Arabia** is 23rd with a GDP of \$468,800,000 just behind the state of **Ohio** with a GDP of \$471,508,000. If **California** was a country its GDP of \$1,846,757,000 would rank 8th in the world just ahead of the Russian Federation at \$1,679,484,000 GDP. What are we doing to address our own problems... and our opportunities here in America? Manufacturing generates real wealth!

Wake up America! Our manufacturing sectors and our capital intensive infrastructure is in need of a skilled workforce headed up by entrepreneurial, forward thinking business leaders. Let's do our part in telling our success stories to our communities, our schools, our media, and our politicians.

Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs Foundation" (NBTF)

Through its manufacturing summer camps and scholarships, NBT is inspiring the next generation of manufacturers, welders, plumbers, carpenters and more ... one tinkerer at a time. John Ratzenberger, a founder of NBT, speaks on behalf of the organization and how we are addressing the urgent need to engage young people in career preparation for well-paid, fulfilling jobs that require hands-on skills. NBT and the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE) have partnered together to launch a unique summer camp program that combines elements of manufacturing and entrepreneurship—how things are made and how businesses develop. Campers design and build a product experiencing the start to finish satisfaction of creating something they can show off with pride. Throughout the process, they learn how to do CAD design and operate various kinds of manufacturing machinery under the close supervision of expert manufacturing trainers. They will also tour local manufacturing facilities learning what kinds of jobs exist, what skills and training are required, and how those businesses developed. They will have the opportunity to hear directly from local manufacturing company owners how they started their businesses, applying basic entrepreneurship principles to understand how a single product idea becomes a business. (<http://www.nutsandboltsfoundation.org>)

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