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'Made in the U.S.A.' isn't dead, just different

Manufacturing sector is shedding jobs; Experts see it changing



Keith Srakocic / AP

Pam Myers works the line at Berner International in New Castle, Pa. Chief Executive Georgia Berner keeps her company in the United States because she relies on her staff's deep knowledge of air blowers, which are custom made for clients using metal plates, fans, motors and electronic parts assembled at the company's 60,000-square-foot factory.

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AP Associated Press

updated 2:45 p.m. PT, Mon., Feb. 16, 2009

WASHINGTON - It may seem like the country that used to make everything is on the brink of making nothing.

In January, 207,000 U.S. manufacturing jobs vanished in the largest one-month drop since October 1982. Factory activity is hovering at a 28-year low. Even before the recession, plants were hemorrhaging work to foreign competitors with cheap labor. And some companies were moving production overseas.

But manufacturing in the United States isn't dead or even dying. It's moving upscale, following the biggest profits, and becoming more efficient, just like Henry Ford did when he created the assembly line to make the Model T.

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The U.S. by far remains the world's leading manufacturer by value of goods produced. It hit a record \$1.6 trillion in 2007 — nearly double the \$811 billion in 1987. For every \$1 of value produced in China's factories, America generates \$2.50.

So what's made in the USA these days?

The U.S. sold more than \$200 billion worth of aircraft, missiles and space-related equipment in 2007. And \$80 billion worth of autos and auto parts. Deere & Co., best known for its bright green and yellow tractors, sold \$16.5 billion worth of farming equipment last year, much of it to the rest of the world. Then there's energy products like gas turbines for power plants made by General Electric, computer chips from Intel and fighter jets from Lockheed Martin. Household names like GE, General Motors, IBM, Boeing, Hewlett-Packard are among the largest manufacturers by revenue.

(Msnbc.com is a joint-venture of Microsoft and NBC Universal. The latter is a division of GE.)

Several trends have emerged over the decades:

- America makes things that other countries can't. Today, "Made in USA" is more likely to be stamped on heavy equipment or the circuits that go inside other products than the TVs, toys, clothes and other items found on store shelves.
- U.S. companies have shifted toward high-end manufacturing as the production of low-value goods moves overseas. This has resulted in lower prices for shoppers and higher profits for companies.
- When demand slumps, all types of manufacturing jobs are lost. Some higher-end jobs — but not all — return with good times. Workers who make goods more cheaply produced overseas suffer.

Once this recession runs its course, surviving manufacturers will emerge more efficient and profitable, economists say. More valuable products will be made using fewer people. Products will be made where labor and other costs are cheaper. And manufacturers will focus on the most lucrative products.

Aircraft maker Boeing announced last month it was cutting about 10,000 jobs. At the same time, workers are streamlining the wing assembly for the 737, the company's best-selling commercial plane, said Richard McCabe, a wing line mechanic for 10 years and former Machinists union shop steward.

He and his co-workers at the factory in suburban Renton, Wash., were asked about 3 1/2 years ago to figure out how to switch from building wings in massive stationary jigs mounted vertically, "the

way things have been done here forever," to "one-piece flow," assembling them horizontally on a moving line similar to automobiles. The new process is set to begin by the end of the year.

"I won't go to the wing. The wing will come to me," McCabe said. "It's going to save them millions in scrap and rework."

McCabe said there was a lot of initial resistance on the shop floor, but Boeing's increased outsourcing — including wing production for the new 787 to Japan — helped change workers' minds.

"I told the guys, it's development or die," McCabe said. "If we can get this done, it assures us the future."

About 12.7 million Americans, or 8 percent of the labor force, still held manufacturing jobs as of last month. Fifty years ago, 14.6 million people, or 28 percent of all workers, toiled in factories. The numbers — though painful to those who lost jobs — show how companies are making more with less.

Economy in Turmoil

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A blizzard of selling swept the Dow Jones industrials to its first close below 7,000 in almost 12 years Monday as despair grew that the recession would be deep and long.

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