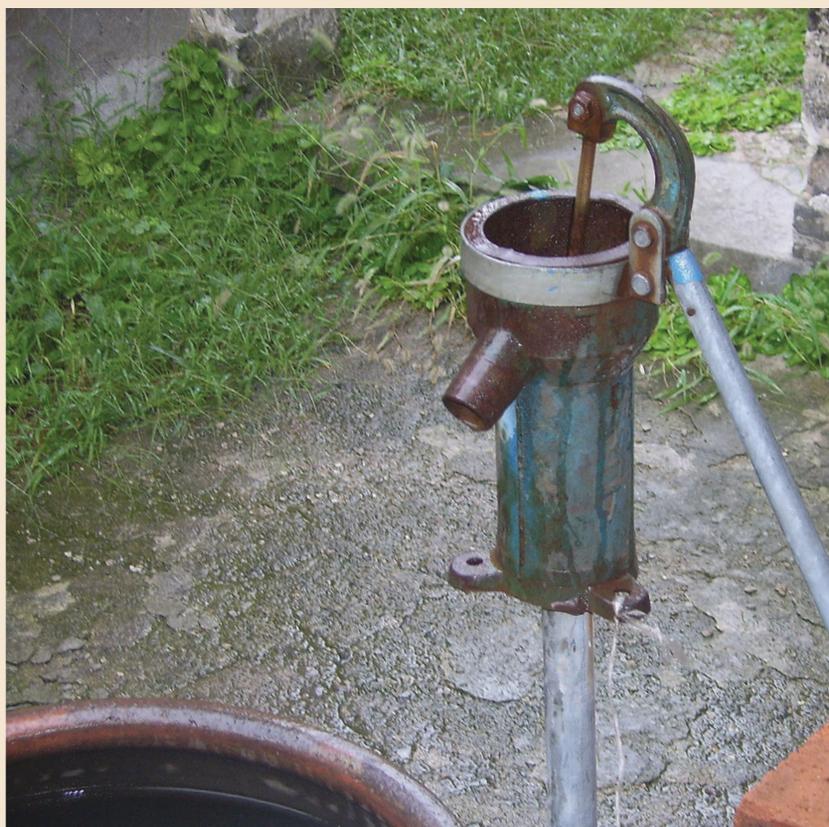


Priming the Pump

Worker Development For a New Generation of Apparel Manufacturing



Get into a conversation with anyone who makes American apparel and you'll inevitably be asked, "Do you know any good sewers?" From big-time company founders and presidents to new moms with a better idea for a baby blanket, everyone is beating the bushes for talented and professional production sewers.

The shortage of skilled apparel workers is the product of two juxtaposed mega trends in the USA. First is the decline in sewing. There has been a 40 year shift away from home sewn apparel and the education and resources supporting that cultural value. Secondly, is the increasing

market strength of American-Made product. The 'Made in USA' murmur is quickly becoming a proclamation and it has become tribe-right to wear locally made clothing, especially among the first wave and early adopters in our culture.

Small factories have full schedules and are stretched thin. Next to getting no orders, the most dangerous thing for the health of a factory is getting large orders like they are now. There isn't the time to train sewers; smaller factories need operators that can step in and make it happen, at full speed, from day one.

Programs like The Maker's

Coalition in Minneapolis and Gar-Co in tiny Rifle, Colorado fill this need through training programs designed with specific communities in mind.

The Makers Coalition is a group of (currently) 43 companies and nonprofits that have come together to share resources and train apparel and sewn goods workers. The founders realized that the lack of skilled labor was constricting their businesses, and that although none of them were large enough to shoulder a training program on their own, they could cobble one together. In concert with Dunwoody College the Makers Coalition has created a six-month curriculum that leads to a national certification and 90 percent job placement rate. A new chapter just opened in Detroit.

In Colorado, the Colorado Mountain College has teamed up with the local government in Garfield County to bootstrap Gar-Co Sewing Works. They spent all of \$27,000 buying the machinery and renting the space to get a handful of willing students into a training program. To take in the newly trained workers, Whole Works, a small sewing factory for hire was formed. Started as a benefit corporation, one of the first in Colorado, its goal is to provide stable employment for a part of the state that really needs it.

I often hear people lament about manufacturing jobs that go unfilled. "The sewers are gone," the husband of one of my seamstresses' says to me, "They're all nail technicians now." His point, if roughly illustrated, is true. The sewers of the past have moved on, their lives have changed and they're not coming back. The American apparel industry will have to look to a new generation of cut and sew tradespeople and structure a work environment in their reflection.

The art of sewing crosses all social and economic lines because value is simply the result of what you can do with your hands. If you can sew it doesn't matter what you look like, or sound like, or what your grade point average was. The apparel industry is a perfect home for those who want to define themselves through their work and skill and yet don't quite fit easily into a conventional office setting. All the master seamstresses I work with share the same personal traits: a willingness to learn to do something new, amazing attention to detail and an obsession with perfection.

The apparel trade is an easy place for American manufacturing to grow. It rewards competence and teamwork and it is open to all walks of life. We just need more places for people to discover it. ●