

[» Home](#)

Fewer college students spend summers working in state's factories



Mark Hoffman

UW-Milwaukee mechanical engineering major Ross Schloegel prepares compression springs to be cleaned Friday at Exacto Spring Co. in Grafton. The springs will be used for engine valves.

By *Rick Barrett* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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For decades, spending the summer working at a factory was a tradition for many students on break from school and eager to put some cash in their pockets.

The summer jobs, often at factories where their parents worked, varied from sweeping the shop floor to helping out in the shipping department. Some large manufacturers hired hundreds of students to fill in for employees on vacation.

Fast forward to today. The job market for factory workers has improved some in recent months, and many companies complain about having difficulties finding enough qualified

help.

Wisconsin's unemployment rate dipped below 6.0% in March to a five-year low of 5.9%. But the unemployment rate for workers ages 16 to 24 was 12.4%, according to the state Department of Workforce Development.

Local hiring experts say the outlook for temporary summer jobs at factories — an important source of income for students in the past — isn't very promising because many of the positions now require technical skills someone in school wouldn't have, and factory automation has reduced the number of workers needed.

"Years ago, it was very commonplace to bring on the sons and daughters of regular employees for summer jobs. But that summer-help job category doesn't really exist anymore in manufacturing," said Jim Golembeski, director of the Bay Area Workforce Development Board in Green Bay.

The Georgia-Pacific Corp. paper mill in Green Bay used to hire hundreds of students for the summer, as did other mills and factories in the Fox Valley.

"I had some of my kids work there. It was a great opportunity for them," said Georgia-Pacific spokesman Michael Kawleski.

Now, the Green Bay mill has about half the number of employees it had a decade ago. The machines are bigger and more efficient.

Even with fewer people, the mill can produce as much or more than it previously did, Kawleski said.

Some still fill summer jobs

These days, students also are competing with older adults for jobs, and more companies are using staffing agencies to fill short-term employment needs.

Many youths are squeezed out of summer employment opportunities they once had, said Tom Allison, policy and research manager for Young Invincibles, a Washington, D.C., group that's an advocate for young adult issues.

Still, the summer job tradition continues at manufacturers like Exacto Spring Corp. in Grafton, which hires the children of employees for summer jobs such as work in the shipping department.

Exacto makes springs used in everything from medical devices to military helicopters. The company has made springs for a prosthetic hand strong enough to lift a chair yet gentle enough to hold an egg.

Students employed for the summer may spend time learning about engineering and product development, along with their jobs in the shop washing and boxing parts.

"We are not bringing the summer help in to run machines. We get caught up on work that's more labor intensive, and there are a lot of people on vacation, so this fills in the gaps," said Exacto President Greg Heitz.

"We try to give opportunities to the kids of our employees, or people somehow connected to Exacto. That is always number one," Heitz said.

The students also get to work with their peers.

"We try to put them all together so that we don't have an 18-year-old hanging out with a 55-year-old," Heitz said.

At Wagner Companies, a Milwaukee manufacturer of light fixtures, hand rails and metal products, children of employees or their relatives also get first crack at summer jobs, CEO Bob Wagner said.

"We have done it for years, and it has worked out very well," said Wagner, who as a youth spent his summers in various jobs at the company.

"Some of the (summer employees) have come to be with us much longer," he said.

Wagner's summer employees must complete a workplace safety program, the same as other new hires, and there's little tolerance for poor behavior such as being late for work.

"Two strikes and they're in trouble....There are other people who are waiting in line for jobs," Wagner said.

Some of the summertime work is in the office, and some of it is outdoor maintenance. "You may get some paint on your hands," Wagner said.

Briggs & Stratton Co., the Wauwatosa manufacturer of gasoline engines and outdoor power products, hires dozens of students as summer interns. They're placed in jobs throughout the company, not only in their field of study but sometimes in areas that will broaden their experiences.

Briggs spends a lot of time nurturing its summer interns, and sometimes it offers them jobs after they graduate from college.

"We see a great value in adding them to our workforce whenever possible," Briggs spokeswoman Laura Timm said.

Aiding future career

This summer, KLH Industries of Germantown hopes to fill a position in its maintenance department that could lead to an apprenticeship at the company, which makes components for a variety of products including medical devices and rockets.

"This job could be for a high school student, or anybody else if they're driven, respectful and dependable. We have three apprenticeship programs...so it could be a long-term solution for someone," said Matthew Stefanski, sales manager for the machining company.

Sometimes summer jobs provide a major boost for someone's career, such as the freight dispatch position that Douglas Fisher had when he was a student at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Fisher, now a business professor and director of the Center for Supply Chain Management

at Marquette University, worked three 12-hour shifts a week for Yellow Freight Systems.

"They needed an awful lot of what we called 'vacation coverage,' and I was studying transportation logistics...so it was a perfect match," Fisher said.

"Then three days a week became four, if they needed additional shifts covered, and four days became five if they needed it."

As a result of his job at Yellow Freight, Fisher graduated from college debt-free. He went on to spend 30 years in the transportation industry before coming to Marquette in 2008.

"At the time I didn't realize how important it was, but it made a heck of a difference once I got into my career," Fisher said about what he learned from his summer job.

A short stint at a manufacturing plant can be a way to sharpen your workplace skills and enhance your chances at getting permanent employment. But for college students, it's not a substitute for an internship in the field of their studies.

Fisher suggests that college students get at least two internships.

"I can tell you, quite frankly, that companies that come to hire our (Marquette graduates) will put the resumes in two piles — those with internships and those without. They will be equally polite to both groups, but only one gets their attention.

"It's a lesson these kids have to learn," Fisher said.