A skills gap may leave 2.4 million manufacturing positions unfilled between 2018 and 2028, according to research from the Manufacturing Industry Trends.

The annual event—which opens sign manufacturing facilities to local students—has done just that for many of the participating companies.

Sign Manufacturing Day was never intended to be one day on a calendar. Instead, it was intended to be the foundation for ongoing relationships with local schools and teachers and a pipeline to the workforce of the future.

The annual event—which opens sign manufacturing facilities to local students—has done just that for many of the participating companies. Ramsay Signs in Portland, Oregon, has participated in the event since the beginning. The annual event allows Melanie Gillis, human resources manager, an opportunity to “stay in contact with the instructors. It reminds them that there are still jobs for their kids here. We are happy to bring them on. College isn’t for everybody and that’s ok. College isn’t the only way to a successful adulthood.”

That’s just one way that sign, graphics and visual communications companies have used the event throughout the year.

Providing a Showcase

Ace Sign Company in Springfield, Illinois, first participated in Sign Manufacturing Day 2018 and drew less than three dozen students for its first outing. But that led to development of an internship program in conjunction with the Capital Area Career Center, which serves several area high schools.

Four students spent one day a week at Ace during the spring semester where they were able to get the full experience of a sign project. Ace donated materials and selected a local nonprofit to receive a vehicle wrap. The students created concepts and pitched the client. When the client selected an option, they worked to create and apply the wrap. Students received school credit—and one ended up with a part-time job in the graphics department. He’s expected to go full-time after graduation, said Jane Mosey-Nicoletta, business development and community outreach professional.
Building Relationships

While the new hires solve an immediate need, developing a relationship with the educators can pay off for years to come.

Jason Buxton, owner of Midwest Light and Sign in Farmington, Missouri, has “really enjoyed getting to know the teachers. Not only are they trying to help their students; they’re trying to help us. And we’re doing the same. The teachers have come to our events and they ask us to come to the school to share about our industry.”

Those ongoing conversations have deepened understanding of the sign, graphics and visual communications industry. “One school bought a plotter and thought they were going to teach the kids to make signs,” Buxton said. “They didn’t realize just how many types of vinyl and signs are out there.”

Cummings representatives sit on the board for a sheet metal program. An ongoing relationship with the K-12 technology center is also on the table. Students there take some technical training and the coordinator will post notices of job openings and events at the Cummings plant.

“We are open to people who are just graduating high school and want to get their feet wet in manufacturing,” Norris said. “Building a relationship with the schools within the community has been powerful for us.”

Sign Manufacturing Day offers a great opportunity not only to tell that story to potential employees, but also to provide a “morale boost” for the staff, Gillis said. “We’re showcasing what a beautifully complicated job they have and that we want to show other people how interesting it is. My hope is that it makes the staff feel proud. They’ve expressed how good it is to have students come in.”

And they, like most of the industry, certainly hope those students stay.