

Why the end of auto manufacturing won't be as apocalyptic as previous mass layoffs

Written by The Conversation

With the last Holden car plant set to close on Friday, there [seems to be agreement](#) that the future for auto workers is, at best, dim. After all, a [study](#) of a Mitsubishi plant that closed in 2004-05 found only 34% of workers had a full-time job a year later.

While it's true that many auto workers could have trouble finding full-time jobs in the short term, they also have [skill sets that set them up well](#) for the current and future job market. Thanks to assistance from auto firms, unions, government and non-government support agencies, there is hope that the experience of retrenched auto workers will be more positive than mass unemployment events of the past.

[Much](#) of the current concern for auto workers is based upon what happened when textile and airline manufacturing shut down in the 1990s. In these cases, workers struggled for a range of reasons - age discrimination, lack of formal qualifications, limited labour market experience beyond their industry, and declining demand for their technical skills.

It is these kinds of challenges that auto workers are likely to face as they begin to look for alternative work.

The transition

The auto companies and auto supply chain firms were conscious of these issues and early on started working with unions, government agencies and other labour market intermediaries to better prepare their workforces.

Many of the manufacturers established [transition programs](#) and held “[job fairs](#)”, encouraging other employers to visit plants, to observe the diversity of skills possessed by employees.

Workers received one-on-one skills assessment and career counselling, retraining support and advice, guidance on job search and resume writing and job interviewing training.

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Among other things, these programs taught workers to think beyond their “auto” skills. [Many have transferable skills and experiences](#), such as with occupational health and safety, quality assurance, problem solving, process improvement, waste reduction, and “[just-in-time](#)” supply chains.

These can be applied across a range of occupations outside the manufacturing industry. [Our study](#) revealed a number of specific industries where workers have common qualifications as auto workers - including food manufacturing, health-care, laundry, warehousing, storage and logistics.

Non-production auto workers (including engineers and managerial staff) have an even wider range of occupations to which their skills are transferable.

In addition to this, there has been [significant retraining](#) in the sector, partially or fully paid for by their firms or government support schemes. These included training for jobs in health-care, social services, transport and logistics, and correctional services. Some workers have even retrained to become pilots.

The assistance provided by government and non-government agencies has also been extensive. Skills that weren't formally recognised, for instance, [became accredited](#) through Recognition of Prior Learning initiatives aligned with emerging job opportunities.

The result of all this is that many auto workers are walking out with improved confidence and understanding of their transferable skills.

It's not all about hard skills

But we shouldn't forget that finding a job is not all about specific operational skills these days. [Research](#) suggests that employers are becoming less interested in the skills and competencies of new recruits and more interested in certain key personal attributes and attitudes.

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Also known as soft skills, these include reliability, a strong work ethic and the ability to get along with colleagues. These are all attributes that are hard to quantify or judge in an interview, and not easily acquired or instilled through training.

But many auto workers have worked for the same firm for decades, clearly demonstrating some of these characteristics. What's more, [research](#) shows that auto workers have many of these attributes.

Manufacturing is not dead

But probably the best news for auto workers is that manufacturing is making a comeback in Australia. A [recent report](#) by the Australia Institute noted that manufacturing jobs had increased by 40,000 over the past year.

This is the second-largest increase created in any industry, leading to concern of a future manufacturing skills shortage. The skills shortage could be exacerbated by upcoming projects, such as naval shipbuilding. In some cases, the new advanced manufacturing jobs will require different types of skills than those possessed by auto workers. But there is still demand for production workers in food, beverage and product assembly - industries requiring similar skills.

Auto workers are in transition and for many that transition will be to very different industries with very different conditions. The assistance they have received over the past 3-4 years provides reason for optimism. In the end, while it is likely that many auto workers will struggle to find full-time jobs that provide the security and pay that they used to enjoy, sadly, this is also the situation for a large proportion of workers in today's labour market.

The message for prospective employers across all sectors is that the closure of the auto manufacturing industry has released a wealth of skills, competencies and attributes which could be of great value to their organisation and it remains for them to take up the opportunity.

Darryn Snell received funding from the Australian Department of Education and Training to investigate the occupational mobility and skills transferability of Australian auto industry employees.

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