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Investing in People Is an Investment in the Business

Talent Development Leads to Strong Business Outcomes

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Overview

Marlin Steel specializes in manufacturing products from steel wire and sheet metal and serves a variety of industries with custom products and processes. With 130 employees working across three plants and a footprint of over 200,000 square feet, the company has undergone significant changes over the past 28 years.

When Drew Greenblatt purchased Marlin Steel in 1998, the company was a small manufacturing shop operating in Brooklyn with fewer than 20 employees. The company specialized in baskets typically used in bagel shops. Seeing an opportunity for expansion, Greenblatt moved the company to Baltimore and into new industries, including aerospace, automotive, and food processing. As a result, Marlin Steel now has roughly 130 employees across multiple factories. The organization focused squarely on supporting employees with sustainable wages and benefits. "When I bought the company, none of the employees had benefits, and none owned a home nor a car," Greenblatt recalled. "Today, every employee has benefits, and most own both. That changes families."

When Marlin Steel faced low-cost overseas competitors and market changes, they shifted their focus from commodity products to high-value, custom-engineered solutions for industrial customers. Guided by their trademarked motto, "Quality Engineered Quick," Marlin Steel was able to command higher prices, grow its business rapidly, and insulate itself from price wars and market fluctuations. This pivot required investment in automation and advanced manufacturing and delivered a 35-fold increase in sales. As a result, Marlin Steel earned industry recognition, like the National Metalworking Reshoring Award in Chicago, Illinois, on September 11, 2025.

Solid growth followed, along with national attention. Marlin Steel, and particularly Greenblatt's innovative approaches to talent development, drew notice from *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*, *Inc.*, and the Aspen Institute, highlighting the company's innovative competitiveness strategy: investment in skills, a nonnegotiable emphasis on quality, and a caring workplace culture.

This case study shares Marlin Steel's story over the past decade and illustrates a compelling model for how intentional investment in talent fosters competitive businesses and personal growth. As employers across the country struggle to find ways to retain and develop talent, Marlin Steel demonstrates how prioritizing employees can generate significant returns for the business.

A Culture of Skills

Marlin Steel's culture prioritizes skills. Past features have highlighted Marlin Steel's *Skills Matrix*, a wall-mounted chart showing which employees had mastered which critical skills, particularly capacities in operating specific machines on the shop floor.

Now, Greenblatt finds less value in sharing broadly among employees who have what abilities, but he has sustained investment in skills by providing pay incentives for employees who grow their skills portfolio.

This "pay for skills" model is unique. For such an approach to work, all parties must have clear pathways and shared definitions of success. Employees know how they can continue building skills and what they must do to progress, giving them strong incentives to keep learning. Every employee starts at a base pay of $20.25 per hour and can increase their earnings through skills acquisition.

Each learning path begins with a manager demonstrating the machine's functions. Employees then attend vendor training, with the vendor coming onsite to support and validate the skills acquired. As a final test, the manager administers a test to confirm mastery. Marlin Steel defines mastery by proficiency levels. Each employee completes at least two tests with different measurements on each machine to demonstrate proficiency.

For the organization, the manager is the ultimate validator of skills acquisition for individuals before the company applies a pay increase. Pay increases vary by machine, but there is no limit to how many machines an employee can learn each year, putting each worker in control of their earning potential. As Rachel, assistant general manager at the Madsen Steel plant, a sister factory established in 1938 and acquired in 2021, explained, "Once someone masters a skill, the company shows appreciation through pay increases."

Each employee we spoke with clearly understood their career progression and the options available if they wanted to continue growing. Angie, who works as the scheduler at Madsen Steel, told us, "I started on a press welder, general labor, did that for a while, then Steve came along, moved me to the precision wire room, did that for eight years, then got jig welders, programmed and set them up. Then got the Clifford robotic welder … and then got moved into the office with a computer. Scheduling, which means getting the right jobs out at the right time, which isn't easy."

Haley, who joined the company in 2024, shared how accessible training changed her trajectory: "I started on the floor and within months was asked to step into shipping and receiving. I had no experience, but they said, 'That's fine, we'll train you.' At first, I was intimidated, but everyone here makes you feel comfortable. I can ask anyone for help and they don't make me feel ridiculous." She added, "I had to get over the fear of asking for help. That's how I learned."

The time investment for both the employee and the company depends on the machine's complexity and the products it produces. Greenblatt emphasized the need to give employees responsibility in bite-sized pieces, ensuring that over time they can take on more. This flexibility also puts the employee in the driver's seat of how much they earn and how frequently they take on new skills.

Randall, who runs the precision wire room, described this process from his perspective: "When I started, I had never set up a machine. I was trained here, picked it up quickly, and now I run the entire wire room. There's always an opportunity if you're willing to learn."

To ensure that employees stay current with their skills, Marlin Steel uses a rotational system that moves individuals between machines they have already mastered. This system means that no productivity is lost when someone goes out on vacation or parental leave, and every employee stays fresh.

The company places no cap on the amount of training each employee can receive per year. According to Greenblatt, this policy gives the company greater agility to respond to shifts in its business: “We don’t have a cap, we want people to be more agile. We need them to run a couple of machines – not like college, where you can pick your 60 courses. Instead, we need this machine; we need to train you here, need to train you there.” The company also encourages continuous skills development because leadership understands that higher-skilled employees grow more valuable to both the company and the wider workforce. Hiring individuals who have a desire to learn and are willing to do the work makes a huge impact on both the business and culture of learning within the workforce.

The Power of Curiosity

Curiosity runs deep at Marlin Steel, shaping how employees learn, grow, and strengthen the business. Team members at every level describe curiosity not as a “nice-to-have” but as a daily habit that drives improvement and resilience.

“A lot of our people are curious – improving processes on the shop floor, asking what else we could make, and finding ways to do their jobs better. That curiosity makes us better prepared as a business.” – Rachel

“I’m always learning something. The more I know, the happier I am because I like to learn and know how to do stuff.” – Angie

“At first, I was intimidated, but I learned how to ask for help. Everyone makes you feel comfortable, and that helped me stay curious and keep learning.” – Haley

“Sometimes you don’t understand why the machine is doing what it’s doing, but that’s where being curious comes in.” – Randall

By fostering a culture where questions are welcomed and experimentation is encouraged, Marlin ensures employees grow their confidence and capabilities. This cycle of curiosity and growth doesn’t just benefit employees – it fuels the company’s expansion and ability to adapt in a changing industry.

Sustaining Culture Through Growth

Success at Marlin Steel is defined through multiple lenses: profitability, quality, safety, and people development, all tied to the company’s trademarked motto, “Quality Engineered Quick.” Delivering on this standard requires rigorous attention to hiring and training practices that focus as much on durable skills as on technical expertise.

When hiring, the company looks for durable skills: punctuality, a pleasant demeanor, an earnest approach to work, a positive attitude, staying off phones, and attention to detail. Confidence is considered vital alongside technical expertise, especially in management and quality roles where daily decisions directly affect the business. Rachel Marsh reinforced this point: "You might have everything there, but if you're not confident, you don't succeed. From production to management, our people need to make decisions every day that impact the company." She also noted, "We've had long-tenured employees retire, and we're rethinking how to prepare for that. It's about creating backups and building skills so no one person carries all the knowledge."

For most roles, previous wire factory experience is not required. Each candidate completes a simple prehire assessment of six questions covering basic math and a screener for durable skills. At a recent job fair for a new Michigan factory, 315 people expressed interest in 15 open roles.

Another key differentiator for Marlin Steel is its employee referral recruiting model, which has produced the strongest hiring outcomes. If a current employee successfully refers a new employee, the referrer gets a $4,000 bonus spread over one year ($1,000 paid each quarter over the first year). This bonus motivates the referrer to mentor the new hire, strengthening retention and safety.

Stories of transformation illustrate the impact of these practices. Haley reflected, "Marlin Steel is willing to give people a chance. By noticing people and recognizing their potential, the organization succeeds. Since starting here, my life has completely turned around. I have a new car, a place to live, and stability for my kids."

Angie echoed the culture of loyalty: "This is the kind of place where the company is here for me, and I'm here for them. Even though we have rules, leadership is willing to bend them when people need them. That loyalty goes both ways." She explained, "Sometimes people just need reassurance. I try to be the glue — reminding folks they're doing a good job."

In 2024, the company hired another employee after her release from the justice system with few technical skills but a strong spirit and work ethic. Within months, the company trained her on advanced machinery and sent her for vendor instruction — the first time she had ever flown. Greenblatt framed the investment as an expression of confidence: "Here she was not a year ago in jail, and here's a company that has so much confidence in her that we're flying her across the country, putting her up in a hotel, rolling out the red carpet so she can learn." Such stories highlight how investing in employees yields both business results and life-changing personal outcomes.

Training and advancement follow the same intentional design. Employees can master any number of machines, with each skill validated through testing and rewarded with permanent pay increases. Junior employees grow into highly technical roles, such as operating multimillion-dollar robotic welding machines and 3D wire-bending machines, where success requires reading blueprints, setting up orders, and troubleshooting problems — not simply pushing buttons. In this system, every employee has a transparent pathway forward, and the business benefits from a more agile and resilient workforce.

Staying Competitive

Three factors are key to Marlin Steel's competitiveness in its industry: **retention**, **adaptability**, and **consistency**. Each factor drives the business's ability to retain talent and keep up with business demand.

Retention

Greenblatt put it simply: "When you treat your people well, they stay." He emphasized that the company's goal is to provide "**stable, long-term careers that offer predictability and growth**." This approach has paid off. Retention rates are exceptionally high, thus minimizing recruitment costs, reducing the need for human resources staff, and lowering absenteeism.

Randall pointed to another piece of the retention puzzle: "Raises are tied to skills. If you learn something new, you see it in your pay. That keeps people motivated to keep growing." He also emphasized that, "Back here, you can't be afraid to tinker. Sometimes machines don't make sense, and you have to troubleshoot. I like figuring out what's causing the problem."

Adaptability

Marlin Steel was not immune to the disruption of COVID-19 in 2020, which caused a 96% drop in client sales. "My best clients were aerospace clients," Greenblatt recalled. "My clients' sales went down — if not allowed to fly, airlines do not need baskets.… Here I had a cohort of awesome people who wanted to put bread on their table, but I had nothing for them to do because my biggest clients were gone."

In response, the company pivoted to producing test tube racks, IV poles, and sanitizer stands. Customers needed these products to be made in America, and because employees had mastered multiple machines, the company adapted quickly to fill the need.

Since then, the company has remained nimble. As airline and automotive orders returned, the workforce's broad skill base enabled the business to shift smoothly between industries, fulfilling orders efficiently and without disruption.

Consistency

High retention and adaptability create a stable foundation of consistency. Unlike many large firms that cut 3%-5% of staff annually, Marlin Steel avoids layoffs and maintains steady employment even during surges or downturns. Predictable schedules, reliable volumes of work, and well-distributed skills ensure continuity that benefits both the business and its employees.

What We Learned: Marlin Steel's Approach

When UpSkill America spent time with Marlin Steel's leadership and workforce, there were four key learnings that other businesses of varying industries and sizes can replicate.

1. Investing in people through training and compensation has long-term advantages

Greenblatt made this point quite plainly when he said, *"It is cheaper to pay people well*." By pairing wage increases with skill development, employees are more likely to stay for the long term. The starting wage at Marlin Steel is over $20 an hour, and each new machine an employee learns adds at least $1 per hour to their wages. By making these investments, the company saves costs in recruitment, hiring, and onboarding, and it incentivizes employees to keep learning.

2. Prioritizing communities where factories are located results in employees feeling invested

Marlin Steel believes that providing quality jobs offers stability to local communities that have been affected by decades of manufacturing decline. "We host quarterly events for employees and their families," Greenblatt said. "We want our workers to know that they matter to us." Knowing the company is here to stay and prioritizes its people leads employees to see their jobs as long-term career paths.

Rachel reinforced this point: "We participate in Manufacturing Day at the local schools and are a part of the local economic development organization because we want the community to know that there are good jobs in the area." She also admitted, "We don't do enough to expand the talent pipeline. Temp agencies send general labor, but we need skilled workers. We've started working with local schools and colleges, but there's more to do."

3. Incentivizing skill acquisition drives business growth and serves as a differentiator for both the business and employees

The company's emphasis on skill development has led to productivity gains, less waste, and overall business growth. Regular reflection meetings help employees understand the impact of their work on financial performance and quality outcomes. As Rachel, the assistant general manager, said, "We encourage employees to be conscious of how much they impact the company.… That's making us more revenue and making it easier to pay employees more."

4. Creating a culture of curiosity creates a feeling of safety for employees

Employees describe Marlin Steel as a supportive, family-oriented workplace where asking for help is encouraged and life challenges are met with understanding. This culture makes opportunities accessible to a broader range of workers, including those with nontraditional backgrounds. Haley, an employee in Shipping & Receiving, said, "Marlin Steel is willing to give people a chance. By noticing people and recognizing their potential, the organization succeeds. Everyone here makes you feel comfortable. I can ask anyone for help, and they don't make me feel ridiculous."

Conclusion

Marlin Steel demonstrates that a skills-based culture can serve as both a competitive strategy and a foundation for community impact. By aligning business priorities with investments in training, compensation, and culture, the company has created a workforce that is resilient, adaptive, and deeply engaged. Its model shows a path to competitiveness through empowering people with opportunities to grow.

For employers searching for ways to improve retention, adaptability, and performance, Marlin Steel offers a road map: define the skills that matter, provide structured pathways for development, link learning to pay, and cultivate a culture of safety and trust.

The outcome is a business that thrives in competitive markets and a workforce that thrives alongside it.

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