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## Cover story

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Official preview of the  
Canadian Machine Tool Show



## Family values on the shop floor

On a flight from Germany to Toronto, I was taken aback to read about how several U.S. employers have implemented 24-hour daycare to accommodate workers on the night shift. Parents were excited about the prospect of dropping their kids off at night care, and picking them up in the morning only to drop them off at school. I was startled to learn that some American states have had to legislate that parents cannot leave their kids in child care for more than 22 hours a day.

So, what does child rearing have to do with manufacturing? I was in Germany with a Canadian client. It was his first visit to continental European manufacturing facilities. After reading that article, I realized that many of my client's observations about differences in European and North American manufacturing stemmed from differences in family values among the different cultures. In contrast to 24-hour child care in North America, in Germany it is rare for anyone to work the midnight shift.

### LOYALTY

We were struck by the level of employee loyalty we saw in German manufacturing facilities. It was not rare to find older workers who were still with the company they apprenticed with decades ago. Moreover, we would find that worker's son apprenticing on a nearby machine. This kind of familial loyalty is rare in North America. How does a company instill this, not only in a worker, but from generation to generation of workers?

### OWNERSHIP OF PRODUCTION PROCESS

The companies we visited successfully gave employees a sense of ownership over production processes. This was done in several ways. For instance, one of the manufacturers placed a card on a stand in front of each machine. The card detailed expected delivery date for the parts being made, current date, and number of days ahead or behind schedule. The information was written in green if the job was ahead of schedule and red if it was behind schedule. This gives everybody in the plant a visual reminder of their part in the production process. If a worker is ahead of schedule, he and all his peers know it. If he is behind schedule, it serves as a reminder that he's impacting on the end user.

Also, on the side of most equipment, there was a sheet that showed the break even point for the machine investment. Employees would know that to break even, that machine had to produce say, 117 parts per hour. They could gauge whether production was high enough to make that investment viable.

Many companies fostered technological innovation through suggestion boxes. I've seen these fail miserably in North American facilities. But in the manufacturing facilities we visited, suggestion boxes worked for several reasons. First, workers have a long-term interest in improving the company's productivity because many employees spend most of their working lives with the same company, and many of them see their children working for that

company in the future.

The manufacturers we visited also paid their employees for cost-saving suggestions, and the suggestions were recognized as a way for employees to move ahead in the company. Who better to manage production than someone who has delivered several innovative cost-saving ideas?

### APPRENTICESHIPS

The other thing that worked quite differently in Germany was apprenticeship programs. Becoming a machinist was not the end goal for most apprentices. In Germany, moving from apprentice to machinist to engineer is a given. Moreover, when machinists move on to become engineers, they do so in conjunction with their employer. The employer sponsors that education, and then you find the engineers going back to work for that employer.

As I landed in Toronto, I realized that the main difference among the cultures is an attitude regarding responsibility. In North America there is a trend towards passing off responsibility—be it for child rearing or for improving productivity—to others. In Germany we saw a trend towards individuals and families taking on responsibility for things like productivity. I believe that this is an ethic that starts in the home, and is subsequently carried onto the shop floor.

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