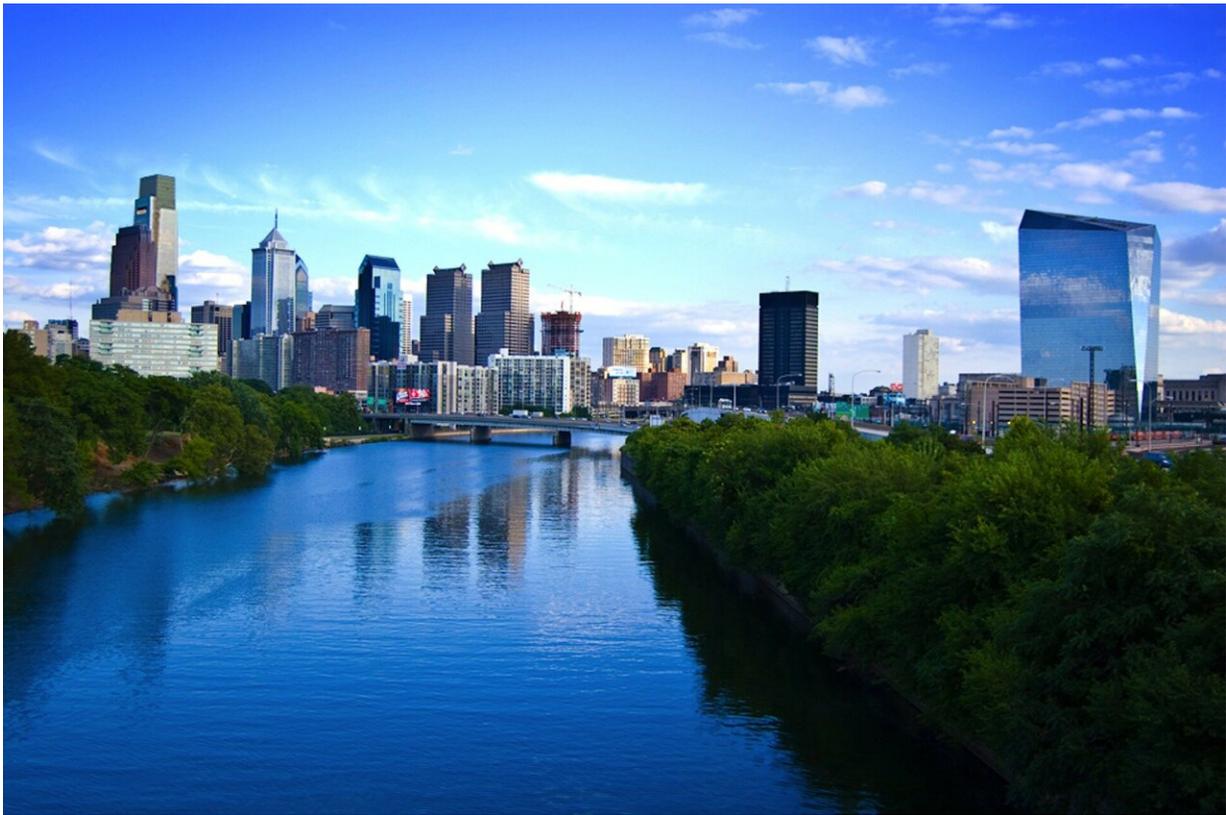


Croydon-based robot maker Macron Dynamics needs workers

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Even this deep into the national economic boom, little Macron Dynamics in scuffed-up Croydon plans to double its plant capacity and hire 20 more people. That is, if it can find the right building and workers for its

\$18-an-hour entry-level manufacturing jobs.

"When Trump said, 'We are going to tax everything coming into the U.S.,' our business went"—at this point, Macron Dynamics CEO Anthony "Tony" Cirone pauses for drama and then gestures toward the ceiling with his index finger.

Just about everyone says the [labor market](#) is tightening, and this is both a boon and a peril for Macron. President Donald Trump's tariffs and threats of higher labor costs are leading businesses to place orders for Macron's "linear robots," a \$10 million-a-year-in-revenues business that automates high-volume bakeries, pharmacies, and e-commerce warehouses.

But a tight local job market, due to baby boomers retiring and Amazon warehouses snapping up workers, is making it hard for Macron to find new hires. Moreover, as Macron looks to double its plant capacity, industrial land has been repurposed for apartments and storage units, constricting options for a new factory.

"Over the years, industry declined and those properties were replaced by storage or apartments," said Robert Olender, a real estate broker with Roddy Inc. in Bensalem. He said vacancy rates for industrial land are near all-time lows in the areas where Macron is looking for a new plant.

"Resurgence in manufacturing and e-commerce has eaten into a lot of inventory," Olender said. Big employers garner headlines, but "what people don't see is that there are so many independent mid-size companies in controls or packaging businesses that rise and fall with the global companies," Olender said.

Much of this boom has been defined by high-tech companies: Amazon, Facebook, Netflix, and Google. But in Lower Bucks County, no hotbed

of innovation, the economic boat is lifting blue-collar skiffs, as well.

Though a robotics company, Macron uses technology that is distinctly old school: electric motors, aluminum extruded framework, belts, pulleys, and screws.

Macron's equipment—typically aluminum framework, or gantries, interwoven with the belts and pulleys, as well as high-speed thrusting arms—can be used to pack or unpack heavy boxes on pallets. It can shove boxes coming down a conveyor belt, pluck candy bars from molds and put them in packages, and automate pharmaceutical labs for high-volume drug screening. The idea is to cut labor costs and/or do away with tasks that lead to worker injuries.

Costs range from \$1,000 to \$25,000 for Macron's part of the automation, with other companies supplying grippers and the computer brains. One of its high-profile projects was a three-dimensional Coca-Cola billboard in Times Square. Macron's contributions were 1,760 belt drives synchronized to the advertising, creating a distinctive wave look on the side of a skyscraper. The company would not disclose the name of any other customers.

Macron's basic skill requirements to make its products are a high school degree, mechanical aptitude to read measuring instruments and handle a drill, and an ability to read product-assembly instructions on a tablet—"like Ikea," Cirone said. "I can train anybody."

Macron advertised job openings on Craigslist with apparent success: 40 resumes in one day. But when the applicants came for interviews, they weren't right for the work. Now Macron relies on CareerLink, a nonprofit connected with the state Department of Labor and Industry, and Bucks County Community College, that vets applicants as part of two industrial-skills programs, said Craig Marshall, Macron's executive

vice president. The community college program assesses skills, tests for drug misuse, and checks criminal backgrounds.

As part of the 12-week industrial maintenance class, adult students travel to area factories to learn what the companies make and experience the culture. One recent Friday, Cirone hosted a class of about a half-dozen men, with an average age of 38.

"We are tapping into any workforce that has a good attitude and wants to be trained," Cirone said. "They are not fresh out of high school or college."

The class trip "gives the company the chance to sell itself and eyeball potential hires," said Susan Herring, executive director of the Center for Workforce Development at Bucks County Community College. "Not only is manufacturing doing really well in our region but the skilled workforce is aging out, and there really has been no new talent entering the workforce for two generations because people thought manufacturing was dead in this country."

Pennsylvania manufacturers boosted their payrolls by 2% over the last five years, state data show. Manufacturing firms in Philadelphia and four Pennsylvania suburban counties shed 1,100 jobs out of a workforce of 127,400 jobs, or less than 1%. But the performance was uneven. Bucks and Montgomery Counties gained manufacturing jobs while Philadelphia, Chester, and Delaware Counties lost them.

Through its two programs, the community college has put 250 people into jobs over the last five years, with a 93% job placement rate, Herring said.

She estimates that 3,000 manufacturing jobs will go unfilled in Bucks County by 2025, partly because of baby boomer retirements.

Meanwhile, last summer, Cirone decided that it was time for Macron to look for a new building to double its manufacturing capacity to about 50,000 square feet.

With businesses eager to avoid higher wage costs through more automation, Macron has developed a pipeline of potential million-dollar contracts that its current 25,000-square-foot plant can't accommodate, Cirone said.

"Right now the best markets are warehousing and moving products quickly through buildings and sorting and food and beverage," noted Macron's Marshall. No one company can fully automate a warehouse, opening the door to Macron to supply components to those projects, he said.

Cirone, 60, relocated the Macron plant to Lower Bucks County from Horsham about a decade ago. Back then, during the recession, he easily found a vacant former pharmaceutical fulfillment center, just down the road from a big chemical plant.

"There's a lot of real big buildings and a lot of real small buildings but not a lot of medium-sized buildings" between 20,000 and 40,000 square feet, Cirone said. He thinks, with the help of Olender, he can find a new building near his existing Croydon factory by early next year.

The local economy has also grown more diversified.

Years ago, the U.S. Steel plant in Fairless Hills employed thousands. Its closing devastated Levittown.

But the Bucks economy has changed dramatically over the years with the emergence of smaller companies such as Macron. "Many companies [in the region] are job shops," said Herring of Bucks County Community

College. "They are doing pieces of the manufacturing process, and they are part of the supply chain."

Said Cirone: "There are more companies with little niches. We are not hiring hundreds like the steel mill, and we are not laying off hundreds like the steel mill."

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