

Japanese automakers' jobs growing in the U.S., including Alabama



Employees at Honda's Talladega County auto assembly plant celebrate the launch of the redesigned 2016 Honda Pilot SUV in spring of 2015. (Joe Songer/jsonger@al.com) (JOE SONGER)



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U.S. jobs at manufacturing plants, research and development facilities and dealer networks tied to Japanese automakers grew 11.5 percent last year, for a total of 1.52 million positions.

That data, found in a new report from the Japanese Automobile Manufacturers Association USA, underscores the companies' robust growth across the country, including Alabama.

In this state, both Honda and Toyota have a major manufacturing presence, and they have been adding jobs and investment in recent years at their plants.

Ron Bookbinder, general director of JAMA USA, said the job growth is fueled by several factors.

"I think it reflects the rebounding U.S. economy," he said. "We've also seen low gas prices and low interest rates, along with the high quality of the vehicles we build in the U.S."

But there are challenges when it comes to recruiting workers for the highly-skilled field of modern manufacturing, he added.

"It can be a challenge to find, in any country, strongly skilled workers, and so that's why our members spend so much time training their employees and contributing money to schools and universities to promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education," he said.

Some manufacturers also face the hurdle of attracting young workers to the business of making things, because they don't understand what modern manufacturing is all about.

Bookbinder cited efforts by Honda's Talladega County plant to recruit a new generation of workers, **by inviting them to the plant and giving them hands-on experience in various processes.**

[http://www.al.com/business/index.ssf/2015/10/hondas_alabama_trying_to_recru.html]

Japanese automakers also focus on continuing education of their workers, Bookbinder said.

"When there's a recession or a slowdown or a changing from one product to another, our members don't lay off their full time employees," he said. "Instead they give them advanced training or have them do community service if there's downtime."

That's been seen at both the Honda and Toyota facilities in Alabama, when auto sales tanked several years ago and also when an earthquake and tsunami in Japan hampered supply lines and forced production cuts in the U.S.

In the case of the earthquake and tsunami, that crisis prompted companies to diversify their supply chain, Bookbinder said.

"That's just one example, but whenever there's a challenge, I think Japanese automakers say, how can we learn from this and how can we improve our own practices?"

According to the JAMA study, half of the 1.52 million jobs are direct employment by the automakers and the other half are tied to dealer networks.

Total annual compensation from the jobs surpasses \$100 billion, up 23.9 percent from the previous year.

Honda's \$2 billion, 4,000-worker auto assembly plant in Talladega County recently **kicked off production of the redesigned 2016 Pilot SUV** [http://www.al.com/business/index.ssf/2015/05/new_honda_pilots_now_rolling_o.html] and **officially opened a \$71 million, highly-automated engine assembly line.**

[http://www.al.com/business/index.ssf/2015/04/honda_opens_high-tech_engine_a.html]

During the past three years, the plant has announced new investments of more than \$508 million for projects to improve flexibility, enhance quality and increase production. It also has added more than 450 jobs.

As for Toyota, the automaker's Huntsville engine plant last year **marked an \$80 million expansion project and the production of its 3 millionth engine.** [http://www.al.com/business/index.ssf/2014/02/toyota_plant_celebrates_v6_eng.html]

It is the only Toyota plant worldwide to produce four-cylinder, V-6 and V-8 engines under one roof.

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