



Public Attitudes towards Manufacturing's Role in Rebalancing the UK Economy

The Centre for Industry and Government at the Institute for Manufacturing (IfM) at Cambridge University have just published some important new survey based research on public attitudes to manufacturing in the UK in partnership with YouGov-Cambridge. The research explores public attitudes to 'rebalancing the UK economy', an important theme in the Coalition's economic policy statements. The Coalition is not the first administration to be concerned about public attitudes to manufacturing – New Labour administrations also shared this concern.

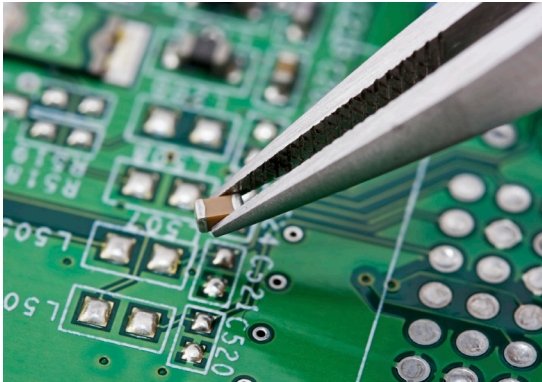
The IfM summarise the main findings from the survey as follows:



- The public have a confused picture of whether the UK has a manufacturing base or not, with many saying we don't make anything anymore but the majority overestimating the share of the economy, in terms of GDP, that is manufacturing related
- Contrary to the expected narrative, the public have a good sense of manufacturing as being high-tech and requiring high levels of skills
- However, there is a lack of faith in manufacturing jobs, as they are thought to be the first to leave the country and not to pay as well as other industries
- Even in that context, the public overwhelmingly agree that we need a strong manufacturing base and that rebalancing can be achieved
- However, they do not have faith that either the government or industry know what to do to strengthen the manufacturing base
- Compared to a similar sample in the US, the US public has a significantly more positive impression of manufacturing, in terms of it being high-tech and being well paid
- Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters agree that the Coalition is not doing enough to support manufacturing and support the targeting of sectors of national importance

These results are quite surprising e.g. the strength of support for rebalancing the economy towards manufacturing and it is worth speculating how far unbalanced media reporting has helped reinforce the negative perceptions of manufacturing in terms of pay levels and job instability. In fact the UK median gross annual salary

April 2012



in manufacturing in 2009 was approximately £25,000 whereas the median for all service industries was close to £20,000.

In terms of rebalancing the economy, the UK public strongly agree (72%) that there the share of the economy based on manufacturing needs to significantly increase and that such rebalancing needs to include a geographic rebalancing between the South East and the rest of the country (59% agree). There are strong regional differences in whether geographic rebalancing is necessary, with the North having very strong agreement (71%) compared to a much weaker response from the East (47%) and London (48%).

IfM note that given the long standing opposition to industrial policy, and the strategy of 'picking winners', across government since the late 1980s, it is surprising that 62% of UK adults agree that the government should target sectors which are of national importance. This may indicate that a reluctance to be more targeted in the support of specific sectors is a Westminster idea that is not reflected in the mind of the public.

IfM also draw some wider recommendations from the research in terms of the Coalition's objective of rebalancing the economy:

- Efforts to improve the image of manufacturing should acknowledge that the public has a clear image of manufacturing as being high technology and demanding high levels of skills
- Future campaigns on manufacturing need to address the current public narrative of low wages and low job security so that careers in manufacturing are represented accurately
- The public agrees (62%) that sectors of national importance should be targeted
- Only 29% of the public currently agree that government understands what is needed to strengthen and grow the economy



Over the years Industry Forum has joined in various projects to provide school children with a more realistic and up to date idea about manufacturing such as the Learning Grid. Projects such this need to continue and expand and science and technology teachers in schools need to be helped to provide reliable guidance to their pupils about the interest and rewards of a career in manufacturing.

The full IfM report is available at:
www.ifm.eng.cam.ac.uk/service/news/default.html#security

Author: Iain Cameron, SMMT Industry Forum



scan with smartphone