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Four years ago, EM & EM Chimney in Hicksville was a residential chimney and masonry repair company with 12 employees. Today, driven by the conversion of commercial buildings in New York City to natural gas and lighter fuel oil, EM & EM employs 48 people and its main business is relining and refurbishing commercial chimneys in the city.

"Our business has flipped," said Elyse Guanti, operations manager and the driver behind the company's growth. "The commercial business is a completely different animal. What we do now is much more difficult."

That more demanding business environment presented Guanti with a major training challenge earlier this year. In March a prospective customer — a building management company — asked EM & EM to make sure the welder on site be certified by the American Welding Society. At the time, though many of EM & EM's welders had several years' experience, only two were certified. Guanti realized that if one company asked for AWS certification, others would not be far behind. "I decided it was imperative we have certified welders throughout our crews," she said.

New strategy needed

The challenge was finding a way to upgrade her welders' skills without hurting her business. If she took them off the job to get training, she'd lose business, because she wouldn't have enough welders to fill her nine four-man crews.

EM & EM's challenge is not unusual, especially for companies in the manufacturing and industrial sectors. Finding workers with the right skills for today's manufacturing jobs is extremely difficult, noted Keith Campbell, editor of the Manufacturing Workforce Development Playbook, which covers strategies for closing the skills gap. Two years ago, a Deloitte LLP study found 600,000 manu-

facturing jobs nationwide were going unfilled because companies could not find workers with appropriate skills.

Only very large companies have resources to set up internal training programs, Campbell said. Some ask vendors to train their workers, but that's a short-term fix. Many end up sending workers to distant training institutes. That was the alternative Guanti faced: sending her welders to a trade school in Ohio.

That option raised numerous problems. First, she could not send all her welders at once without decimating her crews. Not only would she have to pay tuition, she'd have to pay room and board plus airfare. She figured it would cost at least \$50,000. "I was really stressed out about it," she said.

Finally, in April she turned to Sylvia Diaz, interim executive director of the Suffolk County Community C