



January 2026

IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Spartan Forest Products

Spartan Forest Products is a specialized forest products broker that partners with businesses to provide high-quality wood materials and tailored sourcing solutions. Rather than functioning as a typical lumber trader, Spartan works closely with its customers to understand project needs and deliver precisely the right products—ranging from dimensional lumber and building materials to premium Appalachian hardwoods, exotic species, stair parts, and industrial lumber. The company also offers ThermalPro, its exclusive line of thermally modified wood products, including durable, sustainable lumber, cladding, and decking designed for enhanced performance and longevity.

With deep industry expertise and an extensive network of mills and manufacturers, Spartan serves a diverse set of sectors including construction, wholesale and retail materials distribution, and manufacturing. Their team of specialists brings knowledge in everything from exotic wood species to finished goods, allowing them to support clients with product guidance, planning assistance, and logistics management. Spartan's focus on personalized service and dependable delivery helps businesses streamline procurement, manage inventory efficiently, and secure competitive pricing on the wood products essential to their work.

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Manufacturing PMI

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Skoler Abbott

Thoughts for the Month

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WOOD PRODUCTS MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION ANNOUNCES 2026 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

& Honors Outgoing President Scott Ferland

The **Wood Products Manufacturers Association** (WPMA) is pleased to announce its 2026 Board of Directors, a talented group of industry leaders elected to guide the association in the year ahead. Their experience and dedication will be instrumental as WPMA continues to support secondary wood products manufacturers across the United States.

At the same time, WPMA extends its deepest appreciation to **Scott Ferland, President of Maine Woods Company**, for his exemplary service as WPMA President. Throughout his term, Scott championed member engagement, strengthened WPMA's mission, and fostered collaboration across the industry. In recognition of his commitment and leadership, Scott was presented with **a beautiful handcrafted rocker made by WPMA member Standard Chair at the 2025 Annual Meeting** — a fitting tribute to his steady leadership and lasting contributions.

Thank You, Scott

As Scott Ferland transitions from his role as President, WPMA thanks him for his exceptional leadership, thoughtful guidance, and lasting impact on the association. His personal commitment to WPMA's mission has helped shape a stronger, more connected community, and we look forward to his continued involvement in the years ahead.



Scott Ferland
President of Maine Woods Company



**George Melnyk, Jr. – President, Premier
Millwork & Lumber Company, Inc.**

2026 WPMA Officers & Directors Officers

- George Melnyk, Jr. – President, Premier Millwork & Lumber Company, Inc.
- Mike Schulke – Vice President, Granite Valley Forest Products
- Tom Slater – Treasurer, Keiver-Willard Lumber Corporation
- John Lentine – Assistant Treasurer, Boyce Highlands, Inc.
- Michelle Arsenault – Executive Director / Clerk, WPMA

Directors

- Eric Frey, Cindoco Wood Products
- Dan Robitaille, Rex Lumber Company
- Erin Barlow, Barlow Architectural Millwork
- Chris Moore, Graf Brothers
- Mike McNulty, Cambio Plywood
- T.J. Stratton, McClung Lumber Company
- Doug Cummings, Cummings Veneer

Immediate Past President

- Scott Ferland, Maine Woods Company

This diverse and experienced leadership team reflects the strength of WPMA's membership and its commitment to collaboration, innovation, and service excellence. Their work in 2026 will focus on enhancing value for members, expanding industry partnerships, and driving initiatives that support sustainable growth for wood products manufacturers.

Please join us in congratulating the 2026 Board of Directors and expressing sincere appreciation to Scott Ferland for his service and dedication.



MANUFACTURING PMI 48.2%, WOOD PRODUCTS AND FURNITURE CONTINUE CONTRACTING

By [Dakota Smith](#)

TEMPE, Ariz. — Economic activity in the manufacturing sector contracted in November for the ninth consecutive month, following a two-month expansion preceded by 26 straight months of contraction, say the nation's supply executives in the latest ISM Manufacturing PMI Report.

The report was issued by Susan Spence, MBA, chair of the Institute for Supply Management (ISM) Manufacturing Business Survey Committee.

"The Manufacturing PMI registered 48.2 percent in November, a 0.5-percentage point decrease compared to the reading of 48.7 percent in October. The overall economy continued in expansion for the 67th month after one month of contraction in April 2020. (A Manufacturing PMI above 42.3 percent, over a period of time, generally indicates an expansion of the overall economy.) The New Orders Index contracted for a third straight month in November following one month of growth; the figure of 47.4 percent is 2 percentage points lower than the 49.4 percent recorded in October. The November reading of the Production Index (51.4 percent) is 3.2 percentage points higher than October's figure of 48.2 percent.

The Prices Index remained in expansion (or 'increasing' territory), registering 58.5 percent, up 0.5 percentage points compared to the reading of 58 percent reported in October. The Backlog of Orders Index registered 44 percent, down 3.9 percentage points compared to the 47.9 percent recorded in October. The Employment Index registered 44 percent, down 2 percentage points from October's figure of 46 percent."

"Domestic and export business have been lackluster. Our customers are taking prompt orders only and still don't have confidence to build inventory, much less make expansion plans.

In fact, most of any kind of 'planning' has been undermined by unpredictability due to inconsistent messaging from Washington. Artificial intelligence is in its infancy stages, producing confusing and most often inaccurate information. This also causes apprehensive consumer buying patterns, contributing to the challenge of forecasting demand," says a wood products respondent to the report.



The RAHC seeks to inspire and educate consumers and professionals on the uses and benefits of real hardwood products.

Build Your World™. That's the name of the first-ever national advertising campaign promoting Real American Hardwood® products. The campaign launched about a month ago by the Real American Hardwood Coalition on the Magnolia Network, the lifestyle channel owned by household names Chip and Joanna Gaines and entertainment conglomerate Warner Bros., to promote Real American Hardwood® flooring, cabinetry, furniture, millwork, and more.

| MANUFACTURING AT A GLANCE | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|
| November 2025 | | | | | | |
| Index | Series Index Nov | Series Index Oct | Percentage Point Change | Direction | Rate of Change | Trend* (Months) |
| Manufacturing PMI® | 48.2 | 48.7 | -0.5 | Contracting | Faster | 9 |
| New Orders | 47.4 | 49.4 | -2.0 | Contracting | Faster | 3 |
| Production | 51.4 | 48.2 | +3.2 | Growing | From Contracting | 1 |
| Employment | 44.0 | 46.0 | -2.0 | Contracting | Faster | 10 |
| Supplier Deliveries | 49.3 | 54.2 | -4.9 | Faster | From Slower | 1 |
| Inventories | 48.9 | 45.8 | +3.1 | Contracting | Slower | 7 |
| Customers' Inventories | 44.7 | 43.9 | +0.8 | Too Low | Slower | 14 |
| Prices | 58.5 | 58.0 | +0.5 | Increasing | Faster | 14 |
| Backlog of Orders | 44.0 | 47.9 | -3.9 | Contracting | Faster | 38 |
| New Export Orders | 46.2 | 44.5 | +1.7 | Contracting | Slower | 9 |
| Imports | 48.9 | 45.4 | +3.5 | Contracting | Slower | 8 |
| OVERALL ECONOMY | | | | Growing | Slower | 67 |
| Manufacturing Sector | | | | Contracting | Faster | 9 |

Spence continues, "In November, U.S. manufacturing activity contracted at a faster rate, with pullbacks in supplier deliveries, new orders, and employment leading to the 0.5-percentage point decrease of the Manufacturing PMI. Continuing a recent trend, a previous month's improvement in one index was evident in another gauge. After new orders strengthened in August, production improved in September. An improvement in the Backlog of Orders Index in October transferred to the Production Index, which expanded in November (as backlogs pulled back).

However, the New Orders and Employment indexes both dipped 2 percentage points, underscoring the ongoing economic uncertainty.

"Looking at the manufacturing economy, 58 percent of the sector's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted in November, matching the previous month's figure, and the percentage of GDP in strong contraction (registering a composite PMI® of 45 percent or lower) decreased slightly, at 39 percent compared to 41 percent in October. The share of sector GDP with a PMI® at or below 45 percent is a good metric to gauge overall manufacturing weakness. Of the six largest manufacturing industries, three (Computer & Electronic Products; Food, Beverage & Tobacco Products; and Machinery) expanded in November," says Spence.

The four manufacturing industries reporting growth in November are: Computer & Electronic Products; Food, Beverage & Tobacco Products; Miscellaneous Manufacturing; and Machinery. The 11 industries reporting contraction in November — in the following order — are: Apparel, Leather & Allied Products; Wood Products; Paper Products; Textile Mills; Fabricated Metal Products; Petroleum & Coal Products; Chemical Products; Nonmetallic Mineral Products; Furniture & Related Products; Transportation Equipment; and Plastics & Rubber Products.

From the report, wood products manufacturing dipped in imports, new export orders, backlog orders, customer inventories, employment, production, new orders, and a rise in raw materials prices. Furniture and related products dipped in imports, customers' inventories, and employment/ To read the full report, visit ismworld.org.

SAVE THE DATE

Upcoming Trade Show Events

2026 IHLA Convention & Exposition

J.W. Marriott Indianapolis

10 S. West St, Indianapolis, IN 46204

February 2-4th, 2026

Come see WPMA in Booth 517!



HR CORNER



“We allow our employees to telecommute when it snows during the colder months. We have an employee claiming that, since he performs work at home on his personal computer, we are not allowed to monitor his work. Is this true? Should we provide all employees with company-issued laptops to use at home, allowing us to monitor their work? We are hesitant to do this because we are concerned that our employees may lose or damage our equipment.”

While telecommuting offers a variety of benefits for employees, such as avoiding travel in hazardous weather conditions, employers must also address the associated issues. For example, employees should be made aware of their privacy rights when working from home. Just because work is being performed on a home computer does not mean that it is exempt from being monitored or inspected by the employer. Though the location may be personal, employees are still acting within the scope of employment.

Employers providing company equipment to employees should have a clear, written policy that addresses what to do in the event the equipment is lost, damaged or stolen. Employers can have employees sign a document acknowledging receipt of the equipment and indicating who is responsible for any damage. Employers can also consider insuring more expensive items.

It is always prudent to work with legal counsel to ensure that any telecommuting policy complies with all applicable laws. For example, some states, such as California, may require employers to reimburse employee expenses. Creating a clear policy will also help employees understand both their rights and responsibilities when telecommuting.



The HR Question of the Month is provided by Zywave®, a company wholly independent from Federated Insurance. Federated provides its clients access to this information through the Federated Employment Practices Network with the understanding that neither Federated nor its employees provide legal or employment advice. As such, Federated does not warrant the accuracy, adequacy, or completeness of the information herein. This information may be subject to restrictions and regulation in your state. Consult with your own qualified legal counsel regarding your specific facts and circumstances.

FROM THE LEGAL DESK OF SKOLER ABBOTT

AI Is Changing Employee Complaints and Requests—Here's How to Respond

The era of AI-generated employee communication has arrived. Employers are increasingly encountering emails and letters that feel a little too polished, unusually structured, or strangely impersonal—not to mention completely different from any other communication employers have ever received from the employee. Many employees are turning to AI tools to assist in drafting their complaints, raise issues within the workplace, or request accommodations.

This introduces new challenges for employers: How do you recognize AI-generated complaints? How should you interpret them? And most importantly, how do you respond in an appropriate way? Let's break it down.

Why Are Employees Using AI Tools to Write Complaints or Requests?

Writing a complaint can be intimidating. AI tools help employees remove some of the emotional charge and present issues in a structured, neutral tone. Employees who are non-native English speakers or who struggle with formal writing can also use AI tools to assist them in articulating concerns more confidently. Employees can quickly generate a draft complaint or request using AI tools.

How Do You Determine if a Complaint or Request May Be Written by AI Tools?

You may never know with absolute certainty whether a complaint or request was written with the assistance of AI tools, but there may be clues. Some stylistic clues that you can look for include:

- Phrases like "I would like to bring to your attention a matter of concern that has affected my professional experience..."
- Writing that has perfect grammar but lacks personal details, emotional context, or nuance
- Clear section headers, bullet points, logical sequences like "firstly, secondly, finally"
- Broad references to issues, without specific examples or dates
- BIGGEST CLUE: An employee who normally writes casually or informally, submits a corporate-sounding, five-paragraph essay.

While these stylistic clues can help you spot AI drafted complaints or requests, it is important to remember that recognizing these patterns isn't about "catching" someone. Assuming an employee used AI tools (whether or not the employee did) and ignoring the complaint or request as a result may violate an employer's obligations to respond appropriately under a number of employment laws. In addition, punishing an employee for submitting an AI-generated complaint or request may be unlawful retaliation. An employer's focus should be on understanding the content of the message, not reading too much (or too little) into the style, and responding appropriately (and, of course, lawfully).

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How Do You Interpret Complaints or Request Written With the Assistance of AI Tools?

Whether the complaint or request was drafted using AI tools or not, the underlying issue raised is what matters. Take the concerns presented in the complaint or request at face value. If the writing feels generic, focus on the specific incidents mentioned, any requests being made, and any emotional cues—these will often reveal the employee's intentions.

Sample Request Drafted Using AI Tools

I hope you are doing well. I would like to discuss a matter that has been affecting my ability to maintain consistent performance levels. Over the last several months, certain aspects of the work environment have increasingly impacted my focus and overall wellbeing. These challenges have made it more difficult to sustain the productivity that I strive for and have occasionally resulted in delays that I believe could be mitigated with appropriate support. While I am committed to meeting expectations, I have found it necessary to evaluate what adjustments could help me continue operating effectively. I would appreciate the opportunity to explore possible accommodations that could better align my work conditions with my needs. Potential solutions could include modifications to current processes or adjustments that would enable me to work in a way that supports my long-term reliability and contribution to the team. Thank you for considering this request. I am hopeful we can identify a constructive path forward.

This sample message feels vague, abstract, and overly diplomatic—so it's important for managers and HR teams to decode these types of messages carefully. Recognize that even though it is not explicitly stated, this is likely an accommodation request. The employee mentions “work environment... affecting focus and wellbeing,” “challenges impacting performance,” “possible accommodations,” “adjustments to support long-term reliability.” Even though the specifics are missing, the intent is clear enough that an employer should consider it as an accommodation request and proceed accordingly.

AI tends to remove personal details, resulting in missing key information. The vagueness doesn't mean the request is insincere and you should treat this as a formal request for an accommodation and respond to the employee asking specific follow-up questions regarding what exactly is impacting the employee's focus or wellbeing, what condition or limitation is affecting the employee's ability to do the job duties, what accommodation are they specifically requesting, and is it an urgent, temporary issue or a long-term concern. Employers can respond with these kinds of follow-up questions in writing, or invite the employee to have a private, supportive conversation—giving the employee an opportunity to articulate what AI could not.

The Bottom Line...

Regardless of how a complaint or request is written, employers should respond as they would to any other employee complaint or request—with professionalism and empathy. Because complaints or requests drafted with the assistance of AI tools may be less detailed, ask for specifics (dates, examples, impact on work, etc.). Make sure you are still documenting everything. AI-written or not, complaints and requests are still official records and, depending on the content, may be legally-protected activity. Stay consistent with policies and applicable laws. Evaluate the complaint through the same lens you would with traditionally written concerns.

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This column is not intended as legal advice related to individual situations. If your business is confronted with a specific legal problem, take advantage of your free hour of legal consulting from Skoler Abbott.

THOUGHTS FOR THE MONTH

May all your troubles last as long as your New Year's resolutions.

Before I agree to 2026, I need to see the terms and conditions.

And now we welcome the new year, full of things that have never been. - Rilke

Wood Products Manufacturers Association

Officers

George Melnyk, Jr. – *President, Premier Millwork & Lumber Company, Inc.*

Mike Schulke – *Vice President, Granite Valley Forest Products*

Tom Slater – *Treasurer, Keiver-Willard Lumber Corp*

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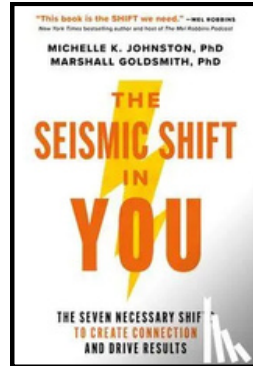
-*McClung Lumber Company, Inc.*

Doug Cummings

-*Cummings Veneer*

Immediate Past President

Scott Ferland,
Maine Woods Company



BOOK REVIEW

The Seismic Shift in You: The Seven Necessary Shifts to Create Connection and Drive Results

By Michelle K. Johnston
PhD and Marshall Goldsmith, PhD

Feeling disconnected from your professional colleagues, your family, yourself? Struggling to make sense of the increasingly digital world we inhabit? Want to approach leadership in a better way? Looking to transform your engagement with people, shift your own thinking away from eroding satisfaction, and toward strengthening collaborations? Grab a copy of this book and start your new year off right. Available in hardcover, as well as on Kindle and Audible.

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

FEATURED ASSOCIATION PROGRAM

When your company becomes a member of the WPMA, you are automatically entitled to take advantage of several programs that are available at no additional cost which means these programs are included in your annual dues. These programs and services have all been designed and created to help your company save money.

One of the programs includes:

Sourcing Guide: The Wood Product Manufacturer Association maintains an up-to-date, computerized listing of our members' capabilities. Customers from around the world are able to source specific products, and then refine their search to a particular species or type of wood as well as certain machining operations. Members are e-mailed a message that a company has inquired about a specific product that they are able to supply. Members are also able to have an electronic link to the WPMA Web site free of charge.