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US industrial groups partner for training

By Hal Weitzman and Johanna Kassel

Jeff Owens recalls how he used to become frustrated with the mismatch between the entry-level workers he was seeking and the skills of young people leaving high school or college.

“People coming out of high school just don’t have the skills necessary to work in this industry,” says the chief executive of Advanced Technology Services, a manufacturing equipment maintenance company in Peoria, Illinois, whose clients include Caterpillar and Honeywell.

“They have to have skills around hydraulics, electronics, computers, software,” Mr Owens says. “Community colleges were not training to the level we needed for our world – machine maintenance. They were training for welders, for machine operators. Our focus is on the guys who service and repair the machines.”

Mr Owens established an in-house apprentice programme, but he says it was expensive to run and young people were put off by the fact that it did not earn them college credits.

Then he approached a local state-funded community college, proposing that they jointly develop a curriculum.

From an initial 20 graduates five years ago, the two-year programme has grown to 60 people. Some 200 alumni have gone on to work for ATS.

Mr Owens’s staff serve as adjunct professors and he gives scholarships to the children and grandchildren of employees and customers, paying their tuition fees and offering work experience.

While larger groups can afford in-house training schemes, small and medium-sized US industrial companies facing a lack of qualified young workers are increasingly taking the situation in to their own hands and forming partnerships with educational institutions to train workers with the skills they need.

Only one in five employers use training and development programmes to fill the skills gap internally, while only 6 per cent team up with outside educational programmes, a recent survey by Manpower Group has found.

“The bottom line for youth employment is that companies’ proactive talent management strategies must include recruiting potentially trainable workers, including young people and

investing in training these individuals in the specific skills needed to deliver a business strategy,” the report, *Wanted: Energised, career-driven youth*, said.

Such partnerships are still unusual, however. Although 93 per cent of manufacturers said they faced some kind of skills shortage, in a survey last year by the Manufacturing Institute, an industry body, only 14 per cent are working with technical and community colleges. But the institute’s Jennifer McNelly says the numbers are increasing. “We are seeing it become part of the solution,” she says.

While Mr Owens’s company is large enough to support its own programme, smaller manufacturers are clubbing together to attract and train young people in the skills they are looking for.

Michael Araten, chief executive of Rodon, a small plastic injection moulding manufacturer near Philadelphia with 100 staff and an annual turnover of more than \$20m, formed a consortium of 50 local manufacturers two years ago. It approached local technical schools, described the skills its members needed and pledged to offer jobs to graduates where possible.

The programme now trains up to 20 young people a year. Because the manufacturers all have specific needs, Mr Araten says the aim is as much about marketing manufacturing to young people as developing particular skills. “We didn’t change their curriculum,” he says. “It was more to get the message out that there are jobs here in the marketplace.”

Some companies have gone even further to show young people the kinds of job manufacturing offers. Tailored Label Products, of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, has turned part of its factory into a classroom for teenagers who are struggling at high school or have dropped out. The company, which has 75 employees, makes labels for customers including Rockwell Automation and Eaton.

The students learn in the classroom for two hours a day and spend six hours a day working at businesses in the area. It is a programme that contradicts mainstream thinking that schools should simply prepare people for university, says Tracy Tenpenny, vice-president of Tailored Label Products.

The focus on four-year college degrees is a perennial gripe of US industrial companies, many of which argue that technical training would better serve young people when they come to look for employment.

According to Ms McNelly, many college courses that offer training for manufacturing jobs are not actually helping, because they are not designed in consultation with industry. “A lot of people go through manufacturing education but are they achieving industry certifications? Not all are right now,” she says.

In response, the Manufacturing Institute has developed its own national credential to teach a set of standard competencies for industrial jobs. The US federal government is encouraging companies to train young people, asking them to commit to taking on a certain number. More

than 300,000 commitments have been secured this year, says Adriana Kugler, chief economist at the Department of Labor.

Many employers balk at the idea of the government setting standards for skills education, saying that should be left to industry. However, many also say the government could do more to push basic science, mathematics and engineering skills.

Ultimately, manufacturers hope that by demonstrating to young people the career choices available, they can foster more interest in acquiring the relevant skills. “The education system is measured on how well we can get kids to college,” says Mr Tenpenny. “There’s no room in the system for kids who aren’t going to college. That has to change.”