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**BUSINESS**

## Manufacturers turning to educators for help

*Programs aim to meet need for skilled workers*

By DEVONA WALKER

[devona.walker@heraldtribune.com](mailto:devona.walker@heraldtribune.com)

They just aren't teaching manufacturing in the schools.

And just like their counterparts in the construction industry, Florida manufacturers are continually desperate for the highly skilled workers who are becoming the norm in the high-technology manufacturing industry of today.

To combat the problem, Florida manufacturers are partnering with the state's community college system to boost its labor pool with job-ready skills and work training.

There are now two initiatives to keep Florida manufacturing equipped with a steady flow of skilled workers by teaching portable manufacturing skills at five community colleges, including Manatee Community College.

The initiatives also seek to raise public awareness surrounding the state's diverse, agile and growing manufacturing sector -- one that has consistently bucked the national trend of mass layoffs and job offshoring.

"We wanted to build bridges between academia and industry," said Eric Roe, executive director of the Florida Center for Manufacturing Excellence at Hillsborough Community College. "We saw there was a lag in what was being taught and what was needed in the manufacturing sector."

Very little was being taught in the classroom to prepare students for manufacturing careers, Roe said.

The field, especially in Florida, has become increasingly specialized and highly technical work -- a trend that will likely continue as many "assembly line" plants move offshore.

Anthony Marino has worked at the Octex Corp., a custom-insulated molding company, for about 15 years.

Five years ago, the 41-year-old began attending classes at St. Petersburg College. He recently earned an associate of science degree, and within the next five years plans to earn a bachelor's degree in engineering.

Octex paid for the classes, and the Sarasota-Manatee Area Manufacturers Association put up additional cash for a new laptop and incidentals.

"It's taken five years for me to complete the two-year program, in between working full-time and having two kids at home," Marino said.

With the advanced training, he is now eligible for internal promotions management.

Octex owner John Weaver says that too often, applicants come in without even the most elemental computer literacy, math and communication skills, and oftentimes they have no understanding of manufacturing processes.



STAFF PHOTO / E. SKYLAR LITHELAND

First-shift supervisor Anthony Marino monitors machinery at Sarasota's Octex Corp. on Monday. Marino got specialized education thanks to a program combining the efforts of manufacturers and the community college system.

### FEW SMOKESTACKS HERE

How big a deal is manufacturing in Florida?

Pretty big.

There are 400,000 people working in manufacturing and about 16,000 manufacturing firms in the state. More and more, they are becoming high-technology players without the stereotypical smokestacks.

On average, the manufacturing sector in Florida pays an annual wage of \$43,000 per year.

It is no longer simply about having enough bodies: "You need people with skills these days."

Traditionally, those skills are learned on the job. With the community college consortium up and running, workers can be instilled with pre-employment skills such as quality control, math, manufacturing processes and computer literacy.

Roe, who has a doctorate degree in chemical engineering, knows firsthand the work force challenges that Florida manufacturers face.

A former Tropicana Products Inc. employee, he has been one of the major forces behind more work force training efforts.

He started working at the University of South Florida about two years ago, heading the Banner Center for Manufacturing Excellence at Hillsborough Community College. The center was funded with a \$500,000 grant from Workforce Florida.

Its purpose is to design relevant curriculum for manufacturing employees.

The community college added an academic component called the "Florida Advanced Technology Education" program, paid for with a grant from the National Science Foundation.

The final peg has been the clustering of five community colleges and the implementation of a three- to four-week long curriculum, designed by Roe with the help of a host of manufacturing executives.

Manufacturing-specific classes will begin with about 30 students at five area community colleges, including the Manatee Community College campus in the spring. The curriculum will be finalized by the end of this month.

The new efforts work hand-in-hand with an industry investing heavily in new technology.

The reasoning is simple: Bringing on a plethora of high-tech equipment to remain viable and competitive in an ever-changing marketplace, the industry now needs to invest in skilled workers capable of running it.

"The thing about manufacturing today is that to be successful, it can't be labor intensive. We will lose those jobs to Mexico, Vietnam and China," said Peter Straw, executive director of the Sarasota-Manatee Manufacturers Association. "Manufacturers that thrive in the future in this country are the ones that invest in high-tech equipment and highly skilled manufacturing people."

On average, the manufacturing sector pays about \$43,000 per year, Straw said.

The program offers free training and will pay for accreditation after the completion of a 100-hour program.

Another issue that the industry faces in trying to recruit new workers is public awareness. With the national climate in the forefront of many people's minds, it is an ongoing battle to make people understand that Florida manufacturers are not an endangered species, Roe said.

"We have to get out the message that manufacturing is still here. The low-cost cheaper, easy to make products, we can't compete on cost. But those high-tech quality products that we produce continue to grow our manufacturing base," he said.

There are 400,000 people working in manufacturing and about 16,000 manufacturing firms in the Sunshine State, he said.

"The image is that old brick manufacturing plant with the smoke stacks. But the modern manufacturing business looks just like the corporate office park. So some people don't realize we have a manufacturing base because it's all clean and high-tech."