

Local industry leading local training efforts



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HEAVY METAL 



Guilford Apprenticeship Program

Bright Plastics and other companies near Greensboro, N.C., are part of an apprenticeship program reaching out to young people for training.

Playing on the Heavy Metal theme of attracting young people to manufacturing, we turn to Greensboro, N.C. — and an impressive new county-wide apprenticeship program for high school students.

One main goal of this blog is to let readers share ideas on how to recruit the next generation of skilled plastics workers.

Apprenticeships — blending training in the classroom and on the factory floor — used to be common in the United States, especially in the tool and die industry. And, of course, Germany and Austria have long-standing apprenticeship programs. In America, we are not going to copy these European leaders, and we shouldn't even try.

In the United States, the answer is coming in localized efforts, driven by local industry leaders.

Now in the Greensboro area in Guilford County, N.C., six manufacturing companies — including two plastics processors, Bright Plastics and TE Connectivity — have spearheaded a modern-day apprenticeship program.

Todd Poteat, Bright Plastics' vice president of manufacturing, said the six member companies that make up the Guilford Apprenticeship Partners are a diverse cross-section of U.S. manufacturing. They have one thing in common: How to find good young employees, to

replace older workers who are going to retire all too soon.

"That was our basic need. That brought us together," Poteat said. "All the industries need highly skilled hourly positions and we just can't find them. We're not going to be able to find enough people to keep up."

Area manufacturing companies already were meeting quarterly, through the Greensboro Partnership for Economic Development. They hashed out common problems, and the skilled worker shortage quickly rose to the top. Poteat said that a year ago, discussions started in earnest to create the apprenticeship.

They approached Guilford Technical Community College, and officials of the school were responsive, Poteat said.

Bright Plastics is a custom injection molder in Greensboro. TE Connectivity has a plant making automotive connectors, and runs a major moldmaking operation in the area.

The apprenticeship program targets high school students at seven schools in the Greensboro area. Guilford Apprentice Partners, or GAP, is sponsored by the Triad Workforce Solutions Collaborative and the Greensboro Partnership. Poteat is Bright Plastics' liaison with GAP.

Students picked for the program get 1,600 hours of classroom training and 6,400 hours of supervised, on-the-job training. Each student who successfully completes the apprenticeship gets an associate's degree in manufacturing technology from Guilford Technical Community College.

The logo for Guilford Apprentice Partners (GAP) features the letters 'GAP' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The 'G' and 'A' are connected, and the 'P' is slightly separated. The letters are set against a white background.

GUILFORD APPRENTICESHIP — P A R T N E R S —

And just as importantly, the local companies get a good crop of trained, motivated young employees.

But getting into the program is not a cakewalk. You have to be at least a high school senior for the first year of the apprenticeship, with a minimum grade point average of 2.5, a teacher

recommendation and parental approval.

And importantly, no more than five absences from school per year. The message: You got to show up to work in a factory. Other people are counting on you.

And forget about screwing around all summer. Applicants for the first class will go through summer orientation and a summer internship, including some classes, and then they pick the job and the company they want to work for. Bright Plastics has already hosted seven open houses for students and their parents.

In their senior year of high school, apprentices will take classes at the community college and work at one of the companies. Once they graduate from high school, they began working full time, while continuing at the college classes.

It's a commitment, since the apprenticeship covers a four-year period.

Apprentices get paid for work, and for their schooling. "This is like a major college scholarship," Poteat said. They get out with no college debt and a good job.

"School systems around here wrongly have focused too long on every student going through a four-year degree path," he said.

Plastics News has covered the skilled worker shortage extensively. The Greensboro apprenticeship effort illustrates several strong points common to other efforts to get high school students interested in manufacturing:

- It is driven by local industry, through a local community college, which typically are much more responsive to an area's employers and economic needs than four-year colleges and universities. Community colleges absolutely should not have an "ivory tower" mentality and if they do, it's time to clean house and bring in new leadership.
- Leaders from diverse Greensboro-area manufacturers sat down regularly to communicate. Groups like the Society of Plastics Engineers offer great networking opportunities, but when it comes to the getting young people into manufacturing, diversity is better. Every type of U.S. factory faces this issue, and every factory has key people who will retire in the next five to ten years.
- They're bringing parents into the process. My dad was an autoworker, so I know the value of factory work. I'm also 54 and my only factory jobs were summer jobs at kind-of crummy places that were dark

and toxic. And many parents still think of factories like that. So if you're aiming to recruit high schoolers, it's critical to get their parents in to see a modern plastics factory.

Poteat said the partner companies are even planning a signing ceremony once they make the final apprentice selections in August. If it sounds like Major League Baseball drafting college stars, that's exactly the idea, he said.

In fact, if you ask me, what America needs is less million-dollar athletes, less lawyers, less professional politicians.

What do we need more of? Skilled young people for our factories. And dedicated industry leaders like Todd Poteat, with companies to back them up, like Bright Plastics.