April 7, 2016 UPDATED 4/7/2016

# Processors take responsibility for skills training

By DON LOEPP

SHARE


Plastics processors around the country are concerned about where they're going to find the next generation of skilled workers.

Too often, this can mean looking for someone to blame — public schools, community colleges, families, politicians.

In North Carolina, some processors are taking responsibility and doing something about the problem.

Plastics News put the spotlight on two efforts in North Carolina last month.

First, in his blog, Heavy Metal, senior reporter Bill Bregar wrote about a modern-day apprentice program in the Greensboro area. Six manufacturing companies are involved in the project, including two plastics processors: Bright Plastics and TE Connectivity.

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

"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."

Bregar wrote that 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. Germany, Austria and Switzerland have long-standing apprenticeship programs, but that model hasn't caught on in North America. Here, instead of coordinated national efforts, we're seeing more localized projects, driven by local industry leaders.

In other words, it's all about local partnerships.

In this case, the Guilford Apprentice Partners program is working with Guilford Technical Community College to give young people — and their families — something very valuable: a free college education.

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.

The program is open to high school seniors with a minimum grade point average of 2.5, a teacher recommendation and parental approval. After they graduate from high school, they work as apprentices

at one of the local partner companies — and get paid — while they continue with college classes. If they stick with it, they finish the program with a degree, no college debt and a good job.

**Industry firsts in Charlotte**

Meanwhile, about 90 miles southwest of Greensboro, Charlotte, N.C., also is creating a model for polymer education training that could be duplicated elsewhere.

PN assistant managing editor Nina Ying Sun visited the Polymers Center of Excellence, a non-profit organization chartered and funded by the state of North Carolina and the federal government, which was highlighting two new developments to help the plastics industry grow talent and expertise, plus a major equipment upgrade enabled by a local processors.

With 26,000 square feet of space dedicated to training, a fleet of five injection molding machines, and five instructors, PCE touts itself as the largest plastics training facility in the Southeast.

PCE just launched an industry-first Manager of Plastics Processing certificate, in conjunction with North Carolina State University. It also has become the first plastics instruction center certified by RJG Inc. of Traverse City, Mich.

One reason the center is so well outfitted is the generosity of Joe Malasky, president of Asheville, N.C.-based biotech custom molder PolyLinks Inc., who recently donated four Arburg injection molding machines and nine screw-and-barrel assemblies.

PCE Executive Director Phil Shoemaker is excited about the new programs and training products.

"I think we are onto something with our training," he told Sun.

For his part, Malasky hopes the training programs that he sponsors will make a difference.

"[The plastics industry] is a great business. It's a backbone here in the United States ... to provide services and products — things that people need."

**Creating a competitive advantage**

The apprentice program in Greensboro and the training center in Charlotte are two ways of tackling the same problem, a looming shortage of skilled labor that threatens to hamstring an otherwise healthy plastics processing sector.

If they're successful, they offer an opportunity to create a competitive advantage for North Carolina manufacturers. That's great news for the Tarheel state, which is already seeing explosive growth in plastics manufacturing.

Processors in other parts of the country can learn from their example. It's not easy, it take time and money and other resources. But the key is finding the right partners and getting involved.