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Chamber takes lead in identifying skills gap seen by local manufacturers

For many students, last week's Manufacturing Career Expo — the first ever held at Grafton High School — was an introduction to a never-before considered career path.

Others found themselves on familiar turf, according to Grafton Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Pam King.

"In a lot of cases, you would hear students walk up to the exhibitors and say, 'My dad works here' or 'My aunt used to work here,'" King said.

The concept behind the expo was not to help businesses fill current job vacancies, but to open the eyes of high-school students to the employment possibilities the manufacturing sector offer.

"It is a long-term strategy," King said of the career exposure program timed to coincide with October's designation as Manufacturing Month.

Ten local companies had exhibits at the manufacturing expo — Axcesor, Inc., Exacto Spring Corp., Gauthier Biomedical, Gilman USA, Kapco Metal Stamping, Oetlinger Precision Manufacturing, PACE Industries, RAM Tool and Waukesha Metal Products, all of Grafton; and Charter Manufacturing in Saukville.

An estimated 400 students attended the expo, which was organized by the Chamber and Workforce 2020.

While some of the students asked perfunctory questions needed to complete questionnaires for entry into drawings for gift cards from Subway or Starbucks, King said many others posed very specific questions to the company representatives.

"Students in the tech ed program came with some very technical questions about what machines or software the different companies used," she said.

"The general student population was more interested in questions like the required level of education and how much workers got paid."

King said the impetus for the expo came from the trade organization Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, which is urging business groups to promote the cause of bridging the skills gap — finding ways to make schools more responsive to the workplace needs of employers.

From that initiative, the Grafton Chamber agreed to host a listening session last spring on the specific needs of local manufacturing companies.

King said the universal sentiment is that there is deep concern about filling technical positions.

Citing that common plight in the manufacturing sector, the Chamber formed the Grafton Manufacturers' Alliance.

"We met with representatives from about 12 manufacturers and got some really useful information, and we decided the first step in our long-term approach to meeting the need should be to host a business expo," King said.

"It introduced students to the products the companies make and the types of jobs they need to fill. In that respect, it was a lot like a trade show."

Ultimately, King said, the success of the push to meet the skills gap will come through a collaboration between local schools and the private sector.

She said the input sessions have already suggested some innovative ways to promote mastering the skills needed to work in the manufacturing sector. Ideas include developing a middle-school course that introduces students to manufacturing skills and an exploratory summer-school course that could serve as a survey of industrial careers.

King said serious inquiries are already being made on what curriculum steps would best address the needs of the manufacturing sector.

"The recognition Grafton High School's automotive program has received on a national level demonstrates what can be accomplished in the area of technical education," she said.

"We have a strong manufacturing community here, so we felt it was important to do what we can to meet the need. It is a role we readily embrace."

She said the manufacturing expo is meant to augment, not replace, the industrial job fair hosted by Ozaukee Economic Development. Those sessions are held annually at high schools around the county on a rotating basis.

Image Information: GRAFTON HIGH SCHOOL hosted its first Manufacturing Career Expo on Tuesday, Oct. 23. Students (from left) Sophia Kallas, Rhylan Gosselin and Nico Roensch left the Charter Manufacturing exhibit with big smiles. The event was organized by the Grafton Area Chamber of Commerce and Workforce 2020. Photos

by Sam Arendt