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## Bridging the skills gap

By [Ronnie Garrett](#) Tue, Jan 03, 2012

Companies and tech schools take steps to get skilled laborers job-ready

It was five years ago when Bruno Independent Living Aids Inc. first started seeing a need for new ways to find and attract skilled labor. Rapid growth combined with increased competition for technical expertise had left the company struggling to fill vacancies with qualified workers.

The Oconomowoc-based vehicle lift manufacturer looked to Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC), just 12 short miles away, for assistance. The two entities banded together to help Bruno fill skilled labor positions and to aid WCTC in positioning manufacturing as a valid career option. The resulting partnership puts the company in great shape today as it faces off against a skilled labor shortage that pits company against company in the race to hire skilled workers for available positions.

The college benefits as well. Bruno provides insight as the school sets its curriculum, ensuring it highlights issues state manufacturers deem important. Bruno managers speak to classes on a variety of topics, from lean manufacturing to core skills, such as teamwork and leadership. Additionally, Bruno promotes manufacturing jobs by providing regular opportunities for students to tour its facilities and see what manufacturing is all about.

“These things are important from the standpoint that some of the people we’re talking to haven’t had a job beyond high school. This could be their first exposure to the types of things companies are looking for,” says Tom Jacobson, Bruno vice president of operations.

Another state company, SC Johnson of Racine, also saw the writing on the wall some time ago. In fact 15 years before Deloitte LLP and the Manufacturing Institute released a survey finding that American manufacturing companies cannot fill as many as 600,000 skilled labor positions nationwide, and 15 years before the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development reported there were 34,000-plus job vacancies listed on its Job Center of Wisconsin website, SC Johnson acted.

Like Bruno, SC Johnson officials sought a tech school partnership to help fill the void. The cleaning products manufacturer approached Kenosha's Gateway Technical College in 1996 to help it strengthen its incumbent workforce's technical training and education.

The Gateway-SC Johnson partnership culminated in the LINK Program, an onsite educational opportunity that enables employees to earn an associate degree at work. "Each semester more than 50 courses are offered at the company's Waxdale manufacturing facility," says Jam Stewart, director of global public affairs. "To date, nearly one-third of the company's Racine workforce has taken at least one LINK course."

These are just some of the ways companies can and are addressing the skills mismatch that's making it harder to fill manufacturing jobs across the state. "Everybody's been talking about this. It's a real issue," says Jacobson, who adds it's time to stop talking and let the rubber hit the road.

#### New models for success

"Companies are getting applications in but tell us they're having trouble finding people with the skills they need," says Patti Balacek, director of business and industry services and lifelong learning at Western Technical College in La Crosse.

The skills most in demand include advanced welding and CNC training as well as softer skills such as math and computer operation. Companies need workers with these skills now, so throw in the fact that training typically takes one, two or four years to complete, and the problem becomes inherently clear.

"The employers we work with are looking for entry-level employees to fill immediate openings. The traditional models of delivery aren't filling the needs of today's marketplace," says Bryan Albrecht, president of Gateway Technical College.

Tech schools are working to shorten the timeframe needed to master these skills and get students into the workforce faster. Two years ago, Gateway Technical College, in partnership with the Racine County Workforce Development Center, began offering a Boot Camp certificate program as a fast-track means of training welders and CNC operators. The condensed training model runs eight hours a day, five days a week to shorten a yearlong certificate program to just 16 weeks.

The college recently completed its twelfth Boot Camp, and its graduates have seen real results. "We have an 86-percent placement rate," says Albrecht. "Students are getting jobs immediately upon completion."

#### Making do with less

While these types of programs achieve measurable outcomes, Western Technical College's Balacek says funding cuts have made it difficult for technical colleges to offer them. "The technical college system has

been tasked with doing retraining but has also received a 30-percent cut in state aid,” she says, noting WTC’s state aid dropped from \$12 million in 2001 to just under \$5 million in 2011, while its federal funding fell from \$1.1 million in 2005 to \$532,000 in 2011. “Considering we are at a very high enrollment, it makes covering costs extremely difficult. We can only offer so many sections and incur so much cost, which when the demand is high, means we have long waiting lists and everyone feels the frustration.”

Paul Jadin, secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Commerce agrees that funding cuts represent a legitimate concern. “We want to focus more on workforce development. The implication [with a loss of funding] is that colleges are not able to respond to that,” he says.

The emphasis, says Albrecht, needs to be on providing curriculum that addresses the employee needs of state businesses as opposed to student demand. “We have seen reduced aid every year for the last seven years; we’re used to realigning resources. We’ve reprioritized the training we offer. We’ve reduced some programming to add capacity to programs more readily aligned with the current workforce,” he says.

#### Bring it home

Another means of filling the gap involves businesses taking ownership of the problem and offering training themselves, says Jacobson. “We recently had a person start with us as a welder. He still needed some training, but he had the right attitude. We decided to work with him until we got him to where he needed to be,” he says.

And, there is funding available to do this.

Gateway has received 14 workforce-training grants from the state to offset the costs of company training programs such as the one at SC Johnson. “Gateway partners with a company to write the grant to pay for incumbent worker training,” Albrecht explains.

Grants won’t cover the entire cost, so companies must be willing to throw in some cash too; the cost varies by the type of training and the number of employees participating. “Something like welding can be very expensive as the cost of steel is high and it requires specialized equipment,” Balacek says. “A topic like supervision is much less expensive.”

As a general rule, companies can expect to pay approximately \$140 per hour for customized training, with grant dollars offsetting the cost, says Albrecht.

But the benefits of tailoring training to a company’s specific needs far outweigh the cost, Albrecht says. InSinkEerator, with headquarters in Racine, offers employees training in math and blueprint reading.

“Those are core skills for them,” he says. SC Johnson’s program offers classes aligned with its production workforce, covering topics like industrial maintenance, automated manufacturing and physics. All colleges have departments focused on customized training programs. To get started, simply contact this department; college officials will design the program, write grants to pay for it, find appropriate instructors and deliver the training onsite.

#### Back to the future

Shortening certifications and offering onsite training offer solutions for today, but Albrecht warns that businesses, educational institutions and the government must look to the future or the skills gap will continue.

“Had we been training in these technical areas six, seven years ago, we would have less of a skills gap today,” he explains. “We should be thinking about the skills gap in 2015 and be training for it now because that’s the cycle it will take to get people ready for these jobs.”

This is where the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC) Foundation hopes to make some inroads with a public relations campaign. WMC is hosting roundtable discussions with manufacturers across the state and plans to introduce its findings at a conference in early March. The meeting will highlight best practices, such as the top K-12 and tech school partnerships across the state.

WMC hopes the project will help address current needs, identify best practices and work to remove the stigma associated with manufacturing jobs, says Jim Morgan, WMC Foundation president. “Too many students look at manufacturing jobs as a second or third alternative rather than seeing that these are jobs where they can make a good wage and produce something they’re proud of,” he says.

“We need to dispel the notion that manufacturing is ‘dirty, dumb and dangerous,’” adds Jadin. “We have to do a better job of introducing students to manufacturing to show our workplaces are very clean, very high-tech and offer an opportunity to earn a family-supporting wage.”

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