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Tooling, other area industries need tech-sharpened workers

Daniel Wallace
Staff writer

(October 14, 2007) — Ten years ago, Dell Hodges thought he was secure. He worked as a printing press operator for Lawyers Cooperative Publishing in Webster, which produced tax materials for the IRS.

"We used to joke around that we were set for life because there were always going to be taxes."

But when the government started digitizing its documents, the joke was on people like Hodges. Facing either relocation or a job search, he chose the latter, wanting to keep his family in Webster.

His search led him to Trident Precision Manufacturing Inc. and to a realization that manufacturing is still alive in the Rochester area. The sector employs approximately 75,000 people, or 15 percent of the regional work force.

About 5,000 of those jobs are in the tooling and machining industry at companies such as Trident Precision. The Webster company takes metal and molds it, stamps it and builds tools that are used in the creation of products in the optics, medical and telecommunications industries, among others.

As with many manufacturing industries, tooling and machining is changing, becoming more high-tech and requiring workers with skills that weren't needed in an earlier era.

"People have a perception that manufacturing is an old-school, dirty, grimy assembly-line type work that doesn't require education," said Peter Collins, director of operations at Trident Precision and president of the Rochester Tooling & Machining Association, which includes about 190 companies with an average work force of 30.

The reality, Collins said, is that he wants to see job candidates who have math and science skills, can read a blueprint, communicate well and possess a strong work ethic.

A person like Hodges was well-suited in many ways for a job at Trident Precision, which employs 160, but lacked enough technical skills.

That's where facilities such as Monroe Community College's Applied Technologies Center in Brighton come into play. MCC offers a certificate program and a degree program in tooling and machining, and Hodges, now 53, went through it before landing the job at Trident Precision.

The industry generally has had a hard time attracting people, and now that many older workers are nearing retirement the need is even greater, said Dianna Phillips, dean of technical education at MCC.

"It's almost like they (young people) have the image of a Dickensian environment with old guys hunched over a big piece of machinery in a hot setting," she said, echoing Collins.

High schools used to be the main source of candidates for the industry, but Phillips said an increased emphasis on college preparatory courses and less emphasis on vocational training have exacerbated the worker shortage. Collins agreed with her assessment, saying school districts have less flexibility now in directing students toward vocational programs offered by the Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

To put the spotlight on advanced manufacturing industries, the tooling and machining companies have started a campaign titled "I've got the best job you never heard of."

Collins pointed out that one of his young adult workers makes at least \$50,000 a year. He contrasted that with a college graduate who might enter the work force with \$50,000 of debt.

"I sympathize with their issues of filling the holes," said M&T Bank economist Gary Keith, who notes that manufacturing is healthier than many people might think.



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ANNETTE LEIN staff photographer
Dell Hodges of Webster got technology training at Monroe Community College that qualified him for a job as a press brake operator at Trident Precision Manufacturing.

Day in Photos

Path to a job

The tool and machining industry in the Rochester area is always looking for qualified workers. Here are tips from Monroe BOCES 1 on getting into the industry:

- Contact a training facility. In Monroe County there are two places to get training: BOCES (mainly for high school students, but it does have adult education) and Monroe Community College's Applied Technologies Center (for post-secondary and displaced workers).
- Complete at least one year of training in machining equipment and computer-related systems.
- Work with career coordinators at the training facility for placement in a two- to four-year apprenticeship paying \$8.50 to \$10.50 an hour.
- Go from an apprenticeship to journeyman's status, with pay rising to \$15 to \$25 an hour.

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Sudoku	"When you see top-line numbers that suggest manufacturing jobs are declining, don't take that to mean every single manufacturing sector is under the same pressure," he said.
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