

Composites Manufacturing



Above: Carlos Rodriguez (left), mold detail supervisor at JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts, shows new employee Jonathan Sanchez proper sanding technique in detailing of a deck mold.

The Workforce Dilemma

Susan Keen Flynn May 2, 2016

Companies struggle to attract and train qualified employees, while job seekers bemoan the lack of solid career options. How can the composites industry bridge the gap?

Attracting and training the next generation of workers is a challenge for manufacturers, including those in the composites industry. By 2025, there will be two million jobs available in U.S. manufacturing, according to the U.S. Commerce Department's Hollings Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP). But 84 percent of manufacturers report a moderate to severe shortage of available, qualified workers.

"In the last five to seven years, workforce development has become a really big issue with smaller companies – those under 500 employees," says Mary Ann Pacelli, manager of workforce development for MEP, which is part of the National Institute of Standards and Technology. "They recognize that not having the right talent is really holding them back." Since its inception in 1988, the MEP nationwide network has helped create and retain more than 797,000 jobs. But individual companies are doing their part, too. Here's a look at efforts undertaken by four firms in the composites industry to find and train future workers.

Partnering with Workforce Agencies

Company: JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts

Headquarters: Cape Coral, Fla.

Employees: 268

Measure of Success: Less than 2 percent employee turnover

When JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts began partnering with workforce development agencies in Florida approximately 10 years ago, the state wanted to fund training for college, trade school and high school programs. So, for example, it would support a lamination course at a vocational school. The idea seemed sound, but there was a practical problem.

“As businesses, we can’t supply the schools with a flow of candidates on a regular basis,” says Matt Chambers, president of JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts and a member of ACMA’s Board of Directors. “The economy fluctuates, and we need a lot of employees. It fluctuates again, and we need less people. So the program didn’t go well.”

There was another issue with the instruction model: It utilized a uniform approach ill-fitted to composites training. “It’s not like a welding course. Anybody can go to a trade school, learn how to weld, then go to a company and weld,” says Chambers. “When you’re dealing with composites, it’s much different. I may do a 6-ounce skin coat and infusion and light RTM, but another company does 12-ounce skin coats using a resin with different characteristics. Each of us have our trade secrets, and you can’t send somebody to school to learn them.”

So Chambers and his peers in the boatbuilding market convinced Florida’s workforce development community to flip the training model on its head. They asked that funding focus on in-house training at the manufacturing companies. “We offered to develop our own programs and train employees, using our suppliers and our expertise,” says Chambers. The state agreed.

Four years ago, JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts began receiving state grants for in-house training through CareerSource Florida, a network of career development professionals that work with employers to find talent. New employees are vetted by CareerSource Suncoast and CareerSource Southwest – the two non-profit organizations the company works with – to ensure they meet requirements of the state and local government. Then the employees participate in training at the manufacturing company on a range of topics, including safety, composite skills and self-responsibility. “It covers everything you need to be an employee in *our* facility, not a generic employee,” says Chambers.

JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts receives \$2,000 per employee for training. The grants cover all of the company’s training costs and about 20 percent of the total cost of hiring a new employee. “It makes it feasible – and financially motivating – to train employees,” says Chambers.

JRL Ventures/Marine Concepts began the workforce development program in 2012 when it opened its second facility, a 300,000-square-foot plant in Sarasota, Fla. The company initially planned to hire 25 to 45 new employees in Sarasota. The program was so successful that the company ended up with approximately 125 employees.

Chambers encourages composites manufacturers to reach out to their local workforce development agencies for guidance. “They will help and mentor you,” he says. “There’s not a more important part of your business than the people portion. If you don’t have time to spend training your people, then your business will not grow.”

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