Lake Michigan College Apprenticeship Program Fills Local Jobs

Manufacturing in the U.S. is making a comeback, yet many companies face a serious challenge: They do not have enough skilled workers to meet the needs of their customers. According to SME research, more than half (56 percent) of manufacturers say this labor gap has impacted their company's ability to grow.

One Midwest community college, Lake Michigan College in Benton Harbor, Michigan, is addressing this skills gap through a successful apprenticeship program. The program brings together on-the-job (OTJ) training, instructor-led classes and online courses by Tooling U-SME, a division of SME, which delivers versatile, competency-based learning and development solutions to manufacturers and educators across the country.

Kenneth Flowers, Dean of Career and Workforce Education, Lake Michigan College, is helping the school build a strong apprenticeship program by partnering with area companies and integrating online training.

"For companies to grow like they want to, they need to find the right employees," said Kenneth Flowers, Dean of Career and Workforce Education, Lake Michigan College. "We are continuing to build our apprenticeship program by partnering with area companies that are eager to provide ongoing opportunities to the next generation of manufacturers."

Situated west of Kalamazoo, nearly on the shores of Lake Michigan, Lake Michigan College currently has 120 apprentices working for about 40 companies. Some local businesses have as many as 14 apprentices at a time; others may have just one. Most apprentices are age 25 and up. The school is certified with the Department of Labor (DOL) as a training provider and is also registered with the Registered Apprenticeship College Consortium (RACC), administered by the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education.

"In Southwest Michigan, most of our apprenticeships focus on machining, advanced manufacturing, and tool and die," said Flowers. "Many of the companies hiring apprentices in our area have a couple hundred employees although others may employ between five and 55."

Manufacturers typically hire an employee first and then decide if the individual is suited for an apprenticeship. Skill sets can be learned, however, harder-to-teach softer skills like teamwork and on-time arrival are often indicators of success. These qualities are evaluated before granting an apprenticeship.

This is understandable due to the rigor of the program. Apprenticeships take four years to complete, including 8,000 hours of OJT and 576 hours of classroom time including online training. This training can lead to many career paths including sales, design, work as a foreman, and more, according to Flowers who completed the apprenticeship program in the 90s and is now close to completing his PhD.

Lake Michigan College currently has 120 apprentices working for about 40 companies.

In 2011, Lake Michigan College began offering online learning for its Machine Tool class through Tooling U-SME and has steadily been adding additional classes including CNC, Safety and Blue Print Reading.

"Our first instructor to incorporate Tooling U-SME into a machine tool class loved it so much because of the time it saved so we added more classes," said Flowers. "Now our training programs include Tooling U-SME courses for a large percentage of learning."

Tooling U-SME's industry-driven online content was created by a dedicated content development team with leading manufacturing experts and is used extensively by Fortune 500® manufacturers as well as educators. Its online content maps to state, system or program level, and to national credentials including the NAM Skills Certification System, covering certifications such as NIMS, AWS, SME and MSSC.

"Two advantages of the Tooling U-SME program are that it allows students to save money on textbooks and it offers training consistency," said Flowers. "Once students start with Tooling U-SME, they want to keep using it so they can learn more. Students can take Tooling U-SME classes anytime, anywhere, even on their phones."

With instant feedback and automated grading and homework assignments, the process saves considerable administrative time for instructors.

Flowers explained that the approach to apprenticeships has changed dramatically over time. "When I went through the apprenticeship program, I picked my classes and did it all on my own. The reason our program is successful is that we now do things differently by helping students sign up, finalize their schedules and advise them on the process six weeks before classes start. This hands-on approach ensures there are no worries for either the company or the apprentice."

Manufacturers are fully invested. "We meet with employers to develop the apprenticeship programs and most will buy subscriptions to cover the classes the apprentices need," said Flowers.

Apprenticeship programs like this continue to gain momentum in the U.S.

"An apprenticeship is the 'other 4-year degree'. It is a tried and true job training strategy that offers a reliable path to the middle class, with no debt," said U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez, when announcing in December 2014 the availability of $100 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Labor to expand registered apprenticeship programs in high-skilled, high-growth industries like advanced manufacturing.

Applications must be submitted by April 30, 2015 at http://www.doleta.gov/oa/aag.cfm.

According to the Department of Labor, apprenticeships earn an average starting salary of $50,000 per year, while gaining a credential that is the equivalent to a two or four year college degree.

For more information on Lake Michigan College, please visit www.lakemichigancollege.edu/skilled-trades.

Toni Neary | Education Specialist | toni.neary@toolingu.com | Phone: 216-706-6644