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Starting from Six: How Proper Polymers Built a Workforce in Tennessee

Workforce development is an ongoing challenge for almost all Tennessee manufacturers. Then there's Proper Polymers, which in 2015 opened a facility for its lighting group near Pulaski — and built a workforce almost from scratch.

The facility is a supplier to a number of auto manufacturers in the region (including BMW, Nissan, GM and Mercedes-Benz). Its clients also include such well-known appliance makers as Whirlpool and Electrolux.

They started in Tennessee with just six employees, all of whom came from the company's facility in Michigan.

By the end of 2016, they had 83 workers and had begun planning for an expansion that would double the plant's size and make it the first Proper Polymer facility with evaporative coating and spray coating technology. By mid-2017 they were recruiting employees to operate equipment on the new paint line, headlamp assembly and coatings washer that were part of the plant expansion. By the end of Q3 2017 they were at 112 employees — and planning robotics training for their internal technicians.

How did Proper Polymers find the personnel it needed to get from six to 112? That's the story that Jamie Miller, Human Resource Business Partner based at the Pulaski plant, shared with attendees of the September luncheon co-sponsored by Frost Brown Todd.

As Miller explained, the privately owned company followed a multi-pronged strategy for building up its workforce. First, she said, Proper Polymers focused on hiring technical personnel (such as engineers and specialists in equipment maintenance). They gave these employees specific training on the equipment and on readying the facility to begin production.

For direct labor employees, the company relied on a combination of vehicles: referrals, temp agencies and its own recruiting efforts.

Meanwhile, for skilled labor Proper Polymers turned mostly to internal referrals from its existing employees, drawing people from both Tennessee and nearby Alabama. The company followed a fairly common strategy, incentivizing employees with a bonus of \$1,000 for each referral they provided that led to the hiring of a new member to the plant's team. Some were people the original employees had known from their previous jobs.

The other prongs of the company's workforce development strategy involved apprenticeship and co-op programs that have begun to take root during the past two years. The co-op program with local high schools involves seniors who are 18 years old, enabling them get hands-on experience that will make them good candidates for jobs after graduation. The apprenticeships involve partnerships with technical schools in the area, pairing on-the-job training with technical instruction.

"The idea is to get a strong pipeline of young workers," Miller said. "We look to grow our internal candidates through these programs" as an alternative to external searches for skilled workers. "We believe our programs offer a positive return on investment and will boost our retention of skilled workers."

As the lighting group's production and sales continue to grow, attracting and retaining skilled personnel will continue to grow in importance. And the company's workforce investments will continue to pay dividends.

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