How to Make the Most of Workforce Development Resources

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For Tennessee manufacturers concerned about the challenge of workforce development (essentially all of them), Tim Waldo of the UT Center for Industrial Services has some good news.

According to Waldo, who spoke at a September lunch gathering co-sponsored by FrostBrownTodd, Tennessee offers an abundance of workforce development resources. They include 65 universities, 13 community colleges, 71 chambers of commerce, 27 colleges of applied technology, dozens of industry associations and commissions and more nonprofit agencies across the state than anyone has actually attempted to count. (In Knoxville alone, Waldo said, there are 23 nonprofits offering 30 types of workforce development programs.)

With so many resources out there, Waldo said, "Workforce development is not exactly like a system. It's more like a small universe. It's very large and complex, and there are a lot of disconnected silos."

Given these realities, the challenge for Tennessee employers is less about finding resources then securing the right ones for their needs. Waldo (whose own organization, as the Manufacturing Extension Partnership provider for Tennessee, can be a valuable workforce development resource) offered several suggestions to employers.

- **Do your homework.** Research your region to get a picture of the available resources available. Talk to peers and to workforce development providers themselves. Interview these providers as you would a prospective supplier.
- **Identify a key partner.** Typically, Waldo said, no entity can meet all of a manufacturer's workforce development needs. That's why it can be very important to identify one knowledgeable partner that understands how the disconnected system works — and can refer the employer to other resources.

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- **Address causes, not symptoms.** All too often, manufacturers mistakenly focus on symptoms rather than a larger challenge. Waldo cited the example of a 20-person automation company that approached UT-CIS seeking help in hiring a machinist. An assessment by Waldo's organization revealed much bigger needs. The company's workforce plan was inadequate for its planned growth, and with six of the 20 employees nearing retirement, succession and benefits planning needed to be part of a larger, integrated workforce development effort.
- **Remember that there are (usually) no quick fixes.** Treat workforce development as a process, not a one-time event. As part of a strategy, manufacturers should identify their goals and how long it will take to reach them. They should consider how employees will put into practice what they've learned in training initiatives. Coaching and mentoring should be ongoing as seasoned leaders guide up-and-coming ones. As one example, Waldo cited Delta Faucet's practice of sending members of their executive management team to graduation ceremonies that follow the completion of a Leadership & Supervisory training program administered by UT CIS. During the ceremony, graduates give presentations discussing what they learned during the training. This interaction between the various levels of leadership adds a level of prestige to the training and builds relationships across leadership ranks.
- **Consider funding sources.** Finally, Waldo suggested, manufacturers should actively pursue funding options the way parents look for college scholarships for their kids. There are a variety of sources, from incumbent working training to rural development grants and apprenticeship grants. WfD partners can help employers identify and leverage these funding opportunities.

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