

Bellingham Technical College certifications provide path to manufacturing jobs

By PATRICIA MCKEOWN

The recent manufacturing summit held at Bellingham Technical College confirmed that Northwest Washington is leading our region's economic health and providing great careers. Whatcom County's manufacturing companies build, construct, manufacture, machine or fabricate ships; architectural structural, marine, defense, aerospace, medical, and commercial components; aluminum and fuel; energy devices; my personal favorites - chocolate, seafood and other food. More than any other industry, a globally competitive manufacturing sector translates inventions, research discoveries and new ideas into improved or novel products or processes. Manufacturing continues to involve manual operations but is enhanced by the use and coordination of information, electronics, automation, software, sensing, networking and computation, using cutting-edge materials and emerging capabilities.

Remarkably in last few years, Whatcom County manufacturing employment grew faster than other sectors of the economy. Manufacturing jobs increased by 200 last year in Whatcom County. The main challenge now facing manufacturing is a skills gap. Employers are having difficulty filling openings with workers who have the required technical knowledge and skills. These include the STEM careers (science, technology, education, and math). A two-year associate degree can move a person directly into this workforce. Statistics from employment security show that manufacturing jobs in Washington State garner an average wage of \$87,902 a year vs. the average non-manufacturing wage of \$47,802. While we recognize there are a wide range of manufacturing skills and pay rates and not all of these jobs pay that average, we do know the skilled manufacturing jobs are family wage careers. Hundreds of these manufacturing companies hire BTC graduates.

This manufacturing summit illustrated BTC's strong connection to business and industry. Partnerships continue to be a hallmark of the college and are essential in addressing the critical manufacturing skills gap. BTC's business collaborations are a vital source of program support, serving on our program advisory committees, providing student scholarships and donating equipment. Teaching using cutting-edge technology is a challenge as these are expensive programs. A recent partnership example is BTC receiving photovoltaic equipment from Itek Energy to support our renewable energy initiatives. Woodstone, Alcoa, Matrix, BP Cherry Point, McJunkin Red Man, All-American Marine, Dakota Creek Shipyards, Phillips 66, Greenberry and Brooks Manufacturing are just a few of our local manufacturing supporters.

A trend that is making headway nationally is the recognition of industry certifications. These are

portable, nationally recognized industry standards. BTC is now one of two Washington colleges listed on the Manufacturing Institute's national M-List. The M-List distinguishes quality manufacturing education and training programs that are a preferred source of talent for manufacturing employers. Our programs have embraced embedding national certification standards into curriculum, including becoming an American Welding Society Accredited Testing Facility, Precision Machining - National Institute of Metalworking Standards, Manufacturing Technology - Association for Packaging and Processing Technologies in Mechatronics and Electronics - Certified Electronics Technician from the Electronics Technician Association. These industry-led certifications assure employers that our graduates are leaving the college with the right knowledge and skills.

Aerospace is one of Washington's leading manufacturing industries with a strong Whatcom County impact through employment and its supply chain businesses. Examples of these are Heath Techna/Zodiac, which designs and constructs interior airplane components, and the numerous fabrication and machine shops that provide aerospace components and parts, plus engineering companies that provide services. Bellingham Technical College arose from the Washington State legislature's efforts to secure Boeing's production of the 777X. The Legislature approved a package that included an incentive to increase the number of skilled manufacturing graduates from the community and technical colleges. BTC's faculty and staff are in the process of developing plans to expand our advanced manufacturing-related programs through a competitive statewide process.

Manufacturing faces three issues: quality, image and policy. Representatives at this summit identified strategies from industry education and community policy. The two-year college-related STEM careers should be recognition by parents and the public as relevant and fulfilling careers. BTC has great career paths into manufacturing, and people can enter one of our programs as early as spring or fall quarter.

CAREER FAIR

Bellingham Technical College will host a construction, engineering and manufacturing career fair that is open to the public from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. April 17, at the school, 3028 Lindbergh Ave.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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