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Editorial

Building a Workforce — One Parking Lot Visit at a Time

Ed Leyden acknowledged that it's tough not knowing if his hard, time-consuming work will pay off until seven, eight, or maybe 10 years down the road. But what he does know is that he has to keep doing it.

Leyden, president of Ben Franklin Design & Manufacturing in Agawam, was referring to the tours he gives to young people — some in high school, but many even younger — designed to impress upon them the good health of the precision-machining sector in Western Mass. and the many attractive career opportunities it offers.

These tours take a few hours, and, while they're not exactly heavy lifting, they can be difficult because the subject matter is rather intense, and sometimes it's difficult to make a connection with the eighth-graders wearing the borrowed safety glasses. That's why Leyden always takes an extra few minutes to show visitors the cars, trucks, and SUVs that his employees drive. It's often easier to make an impression that way than with 30 minutes of talk on computer-assisted design.

What Leyden adopts is what amounts to a 'whatever it takes' approach when it comes to sparking an interest in his sector, and he's certainly not alone. Shop owners who are busy trying to attract business and make deadlines for current customer orders are still making time for these tours — given to groups as small as a handful of youngsters — because they know they must if they are going to have a sufficient supply of workers for next year, a decade from now, and two decades from now.

The 'whatever it takes' mindset prevails not only among precision manufacturers in this region, but in other sectors as well, such as health care and, to a lesser extent, 'green' businesses, environmental science, and the biosciences — and we're glad this attitude prevails.


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That's because, as we've said many times, the region's economy is, and will always be, only as strong as its workforce, and when it comes to economic development, this is priority one, plain and simple.

Addressing the problem requires diligence, teamwork, and imagination, in equal doses, and we've seen some great examples of these qualities come together. One of the latest is a program called Career Explorations — Robotics/Precision Manufacturing, one component of which was Leyden's latest tour. The initiative is designed to introduce, or reintroduce, young people and, when possible, their parents to the precision-machining sector and, in the process, eliminate some lingering misperceptions about the industry.

In addition to tours of plants like Ben Franklin, students, in this case members of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Springfield, visit area community colleges and Putnam High School in Springfield to see how one goes about getting on the path to such a career. There is also a series of classes in robotics designed to stir the imagination and provide lessons in teamwork.

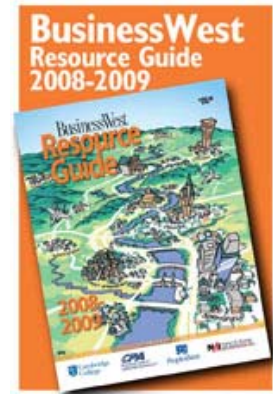
The program involves a number of partners, from the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County to Springfield Technical Community College; from the Black Men of Greater Springfield to the National Tooling and Machining Assoc. They all understand the importance of helping young people and their parents make smart decisions about career paths and thus which high school to attend.

Such partnerships, and there are many of them, as we said, hold vast potential to reduce dropout rates and poverty rates, while also helping to ensure that the region, individual sectors of the economy, and specific businesses have the qualified employees they'll need to keep their ventures going.

The programs have different names and varied missions, but there is a common denominator — that 'whatever it takes' attitude that drives Leyden, other shop owners, hospital presidents, and college administrators.

Not all of these people wind up giving tours of the parking lot, but they're all doing essentially the same thing — making those vital connections.

They are the key to a stronger workforce, and that's why these groups and individuals must continually look for new and effective ways to make them. -



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