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**Making Progress**

Programs Are Bringing More People into Machining Industry

By *KENNETH L. ROSS*



David Cruise says various initiatives have helped boost capacity at area vocational high schools to their highest levels in years.

Bernie J. St. Martin wants to become a computer-aided design specialist. And he's in the right place to do that.

As an employee of a Pioneer Valley precision machining company, the West Springfield resident has been able to receive training through a program offered by the Western Mass. chapter of the National Tooling & Machining Assoc. and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, two players in a large, collaborative effort to build awareness of the precision manufacturing field, put more qualified workers in the pipeline, and improve the skill level of existing workers.

St. Martin, a mechanical assembler at Berkshire Industries Inc. in Westfield, is one of 800 people who have received training designed to upgrade the skills of machinists to perform — and fill — jobs in the Valley that require increased technological demands.

"I've been here five years," he said. "Where I am now is all because of the classes. I've taken eight so far, and I'm going to keep on taking them."

Because he'd like to do more CAD work, he's learning three different CAD software systems — Unigraphics, Autodesk Inventor, and SolidWorks. The training courses he's taken are at Westfield Vocational High School, except for one for-credit course at Springfield Technical Community College.


  
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David Cruise, director of Business and Employer Services for the Regional Employment Board (REB), said the collaborative's many initiatives, such as the one St. Martin is part of, have been crafted to help ensure that the Pioneer Valley's precision-manufacturing companies will have enough skilled workers to fill vacancies as demand for products increases and much of the existing workforce prepares to retire over the next decade.

And there is considerable apprehension about whether these matters of supply and demand can be resolved. Ed Leyden, owner of Ben Franklin Design and Manufacturing Co. in Agawam and president of the WMNMTA chapter, estimates that there 3,000 to 4,000 machinists in the Greater Springfield area and that the industry could easily absorb 500 more "right off the bat" and more as existing workers retire over the next few years. He said that the average machinist is 52 years old.

"About 500 more would get us to where we should have been," said Leyden.

In addition to training existing workers, the collaborative has worked to reinvigorate precision machining programs at the area's vocational technical schools and to work with UMass Amherst, STCC, and Holyoke Community College to find long-term solutions to the industry's workforce dilemma.

It also is bringing its message to students, parents, and guidance counselors in the area's middle schools, looking for potential employees for the years and decades to come.

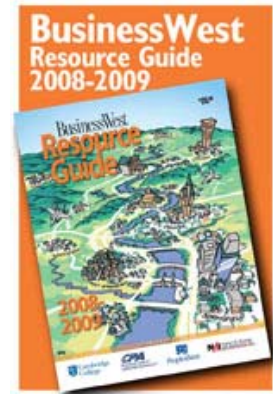
In this issue, BusinessWest looks at some of the progress that has been made since Cruise took on his current assignment three years — and at the work that still remains to be done.

### Grinding Away

Enrollment in ninth-grade precision-machining programs at the vocational technical schools the REB works with is at 94% capacity, the highest it has been in decades, said Cruise, adding that the goal is to push that number still higher. The current total is 306 students overall (as of Jan. 31), a gain of 15.5% from the 265 a year earlier. Freshmen who enter the program generally continue through their remaining years.

These schools include Chicopee Comprehensive High School, William J. Dean Technical High School in Holyoke, Franklin County Technical School in Turners Falls, Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School in Palmer, Smith Vocational, and Westfield Vocational Technical High School.

Cruise said Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical High School in Springfield has restored its precision-machining program and will be added to the list as the program "gets back on its feet."



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One of the collaborative's new initiatives, he continued, is to work with vocational-school administrators to help them retain students. "Retention rates are good, but with the kinds of needs our companies have [for machinists], losing even one student is a concern to us," said Cruise.

Meanwhile, the program to train existing workers continues to expand, and now offers courses at STCC and Smith & Wesson Co. Each course includes 20 hours of training for each participant.

Those courses, which are offered from 5:30 to 8 p.m. four nights a week for eight weeks, include 'Interpreting Engineering Drawings,' 'Tool Room Milling Machine Set-up and Operation,' 'Computer Aided Design/Computer Aided Manufacturing,' 'Introduction to Solid Modeling,' 'Master CAM Programming,' 'SolidWorks CAM Software,' 'Computer Numerical Control Machine Setup and Operation,' and 'Milling and Grinding and Lathe Concepts.'

Eric D. Hagopian, president of Hoppe Tool Inc. in Chicopee, said about 20 of his company's 95 employees have participated in the courses.

"I would say the program has gone well," he said. "We're using the training to train employees for skills upgrades from assembly jobs to machining. There is an absolute demand for skilled workers. The economy may be lousy now, but if we stop training people, in two or three years we'll be back to where we were."

Hagopian said skills in demand range from entry-level to highly trained. "We want to upgrade the skills of our incumbent workers to meet the industry's increased technical demands."

Money for the REB-WMNMTA programs come from a variety of sources. For example, it has a \$409,000 grant from the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, money that was provided by the state Legislature. That grant was from July 1, 2007 to June 30 of this year. Over the last three years the collaborative obtained \$300,000 from the Legislature through the efforts of state Sen. Michael Knapik and other members of the Western Mass. delegation to train workers.

It also received two 'capacity-building' grants — \$150,000 and \$500,000 through the Mass. Technological Collaborative's John Adams Innovation Institute.

The \$500,000, 28-month grant in December was from the Mass. Technological Collaborative and to the Precision Manufacturing Regional Alliance Project (PMRAP), a collaboration between the WMNTMA, REB, UMass Amherst, STCC, the Economic Development Council of Western Mass., HCC, and the six vocational technical schools participating in the training programs.

The PMRAP's goal is to expand markets, improve the industry's capability, and build a workforce to increase precision manufacturers' ability to move into new markets

and to respond to specialized market demands in national and international markets.

"It's a capacity-building grant to keep the precision-machining sector strong," said Cruise. "We need workforce training, and the companies need to look at technological development and to look into other markets. Their primary markets are aerospace and defense. We're trying to provide companies with the ability to look at new technologies. We're trying to position companies to have the strength to do green renewable energy or medical technology work, skills that go way beyond defense and aerospace technology."

That alliance is also a partner in a UMass application for a \$600,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to look for ways for small- and medium-size precision-manufacturing companies to benefit from UMass research. It wants to be able to bring that research to market, thus creating jobs in the area.

"We've asked Allan Blair [president and chief executive of the EDC] to help approach large companies — regional, national, and international — to move more work into the Pioneer Valley," Cruise said. "We're trying to make the case that we have a niche here where original equipment manufacturers would outsource work to our companies."

REB and WMNMTA are also working together to promote awareness among middle-school students, including visits to precision-manufacturing facilities (see related story, page 29). For example, last November, 219 students from 13 schools from Springfield, Holyoke, Westfield, Chicopee, and Monson took part in a Middle School Precision Manufacturing Career Awareness day. They visited one of 12 manufacturers.

Also, EASTEC, the largest machine-tool trade show on the East Coast (see related story, page 36), will offer a day-long program on May 21 for students and teachers in grades 8 through 12. EASTEC expects to attract more than 500 students to its Careers in Technology program. The trade show will be at the Eastern States Exposition grounds in West Springfield.

Last year, nearly 1,000 students visited a mobile training unit equipped with 12 computers, a mini-mill, and a mini-lathe, but that unit is no longer available.

"One reason we're spending so much time with students in the eighth grade is that we have enough confidence that precision manufacturing in this area is a healthy, growing sector that, despite the current economy, is going to be strong, so we need to do this now," said Cruise. "We want kids to make good choices and consider manufacturing as a career. With middle-school students, we're looking four or five years down the road, but we want to do something to convince them that precision machining can be a good career."

Leyden said the efforts being undertaken now are

admirable — and yielding some results — but they're also long overdue and, hopefully, not too late.

"We should have been doing this 10 or 15 years ago," he said, noting quickly that times were different in this industry then. "In the old days, there wasn't a spirit of cooperation in the industry. It was more competitive. When the big companies left the area, they cut jobs and began sub-contracting it out to companies like mine."

He said the precision manufacturing industry also has to fight perceptions that manufacturing is a dying industry.

"We hear about 5,000 layoffs, but not about the startup of a shop that employs 10 or 15 people," he said. "The perception of manufacturing is that it's a dirty, dying smokestack trade. But you can eat off the floor at our precision shops.

"The Pioneer Valley has some of the best talent," he added. "We just don't have enough of it."

He, too, noted that precision-manufacturing offers a good career choice, providing annual salaries of \$50,000 to \$60,000 with full benefits after five years, with entry-level pay of \$10 to \$15 an hour. Employees at his company work a 55-hour week, not atypical in the Pioneer Valley.

Berkshire Industries' St. Martin is happy he made the choice to join the company, and he likes the opportunity to do hands-on work. A Smith Vocational graduate, he had done some metal fabrication work before joining Berkshire, but he had not worked in precision manufacturing.

"This is a great place to work," he said. "It's expanded a lot in the last five years. There were 160 employees when I started, and now there are well over 250."

There's no shortage of work. St. Martin typically works a 60- to 65-hour week. "My middle name is 'Overtime'," he said.

If ongoing efforts to sell this industry to the region's young people continue to yield results, there will be more Western Mass. residents who can be addressed in the same fashion.