

Seeking precision for local economy

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As Western Massachusetts struggles to find an economic niche with a substantial payback, we'd like to share some advice that is often given to young people who are in search of a career: "Choose something you're good at."

So what is Western Massachusetts good at?

Precision manufacturing is the short answer.

The region's long tradition in the field of precision manufacturing dates back to the days of the Springfield Armory and continues today. There are 250 small-scale precision machine shops in the 413 area code with a total of 7,000 to 8,000 employees, according to Larry Maier, president of Peerless Precision Inc. in Westfield.

It's a potential that must be tapped - and that means training people to enter the field while bringing the existing workers up to 21st century speed.

An effort in that direction is in the works. Precision manufacturing companies in the Pioneer Valley are working with a national consortium to gain the technical expertise and advice so they can land more defense work. Maier said the companies' goal is to join a consortium of manufacturers run by the National Center for Defense Manufacturing and Machining, a not-for-profit trade group based in Latrobe, Pa., and bring some of the center's training programs here.

Long-term, local machine tool shops hope to help the center establish an office and laboratory in the Pioneer Valley. In the meantime, John S. VanKirk, president and executive director of the National Center for Defense Manufacturing and Machining, said training classes on subjects such as the newest way to shape titanium for aircraft parts will start soon at places such as Springfield Technical Community College and Westfield Vocational Technical High School.

Local companies are already busy doing defense work, mostly making small parts for larger components, such as thermal-imaging cameras or aircraft engines.

But as Maier said, "busy today doesn't mean busy tomorrow." We think Western Massachusetts precision manufacturers will be busy tomorrow because they know what they're good at and they're trying to get even better.

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