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Looking to the next generation: Aerospace job fair session for high schoolers

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November 7, 2018



David Altschuler, left, chief executive officer of Torrington-based Altek Electronics, speaks to a group of Tolland High School students, chaperoned by Stacey Rugalla, center, at the Aerospace Components Manufacturers trade show Wednesday in Hartford. (Harrison Connery/Republican-American)

HARTFORD – Connecticut manufacturing companies want to convince parents that letting their children go into manufacturing careers is OK.

One way they hope to get that message out is through trade shows, like the one Aerospace Components Manufacturers put on Wednesday. It drew about 570 high school students from around the state.

“This year, we’re going to a more aggressive approach,” said Paul Murphy, ACM’s executive director. “We’ve put flyers out to all the teachers [saying] that we have business owners that want to go talk to the students at the schools, that want to talk to the Parent Teacher Organizations, and we want them to come out to the facilities.”

Low unemployment and a labor shortage has increased competition among Connecticut manufacturers to attract young workers. Companies have found the need to be more creative when they have positions to fill.

Several booths displayed help-wanted signs front and center as more than 100 high-tech aerospace companies made traditional, low-tech elevator pitches to throngs of students at the Connecticut Convention Center. Brochures and machine components were their only props.

The Connecticut Business & Industry Association estimated a shortcome of 13,000 jobs in the state’s manufacturing industry by the end of this year when it compiled its 2017 Survey of Connecticut Manufacturing Workforce Needs. According to the state Department of Labor, the manufacturing industry, which employs 164,800, added 5,600 jobs from September 2017 to September 2018.

The ACM’s hope is that trade shows will help companies boost recruitment by developing a relationship with students – and their parents.

“The big thing now is we have to get to those decision-makers, the parents,” Murphy said. “I can say without exception, every parent that came to my facility [said] ‘Oh my God, this is not what I thought I was going to come see. I had such a different picture. I’m glad I came.’”

Stacey Rogalla, a chaperone for Tolland High School students, said she wouldn’t be opposed to her kids, who are both freshmen at Tolland, going into aerospace manufacturing.

“Education is important. Down the road after that, I don’t see why not,” she said.

EDAC Technologies, an aerospace component manufacturer with a facility in Cheshire, wants to get students before they graduate. The company launched a program 1 1/2 years ago that allows college students at certain technical schools, including Naugatuck Valley Community College, to start part-time training while they’re still in school.

The pay-off? Wages of \$400 per week with benefits during training, a full-time job once they graduate college, with an average yearly salary of \$62,000 by the start of their second year, a \$1,500 signing bonus and a retroactive tuition-reimbursement program. In return, they commit to working at the company for two years.

“One of the main reasons we’re doing this, we’re creating a pipeline,” said David Russell, executive director of the EDAC Next Gen Program. “We have right now probably 10 percent of our workforce [that is] 62 and older; 40 of our employees are 64 and older. We’re bringing in the next generation of workers.”

Russell said he has approval to expand the program to hire 30 new employees before the end of August 2019, in anticipation of retirements.

Other companies reported significant wage gains for their employees due to the labor shortage. Tanya Rivera, manager of human resources at Cheshire-based Consolidated Industries, said employees’ wages have increased by 15 percent in the past two years.

Though all the companies at the event reported a high level of engagement from the students, David Altschuler, chief executive officer at Torrington-based Altek Electronics, was the only one to say participation in such events had resulted in direct hires.

“When people find out that somebody’s building something in their own backyard that they never knew existed, it creates opportunity,” he said.