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Analyst predicts strong CT aerospace manufacturing sector ahead of trade show



PHOTO | PRATT & WHITNEY A Pratt & Whitney engine.

[By Sean Teehan](#)

Ahead of a Hartford tradeshow that will put on display Connecticut's aerospace manufacturers, an industry watcher says he's bullish about the strength of the state's aerospace sector.

Strong defense spending and the concentration of companies like Sikorsky, United Technologies Corp. -- which plans move its headquarters to

Massachusetts amid a merger with Raytheon Technologies -- and Pratt & Whitney benefit the state's aerospace industry, said Richard Aboulafia, vice president of analysis at Virginia-based aerospace and defense analysis firm the Teal Group. But in the years ahead, much of the sector's success will turn on its workforce.

"The cluster system of suppliers is still very strong in the state, and that's hugely important," Aboulafia said of the companies operating in Connecticut. "I think a lot of the appeal of moving out of state to the south has diminished a bit. ... It's more of a story about stability and a capable trained workforce, which, again, means Connecticut has to double down on exactly that."

Aboulafia, who will serve as keynote speaker at the Nov. 20 Aerospace Components Manufacturers Trade Show at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford, said Connecticut's aerospace manufacturing sector right now is suffering the same workforce woes felt around the nation.

There are older workers reaching retirement age, and younger workers starting out in the industry, but a large knowledge gap between them, Aboulafia said. Much of this can be attributed to a downturn in defense spending and the commercial air industry in the mid- to late 1990s. In 1996, for example, the defense and commercial air industries hit a low point with about \$29 billion spent on the industry's defense segment, and \$46.6 billion in commercial (last year those numbers were nearly \$40 billion and \$141 billion, respectively).

“The defense upturn didn't really begin until 2001 for obvious reasons, so by the late ‘90s you had the tech sector dragging lots of engineers away,” Aboulafia said. “Aerospace just became a much less compelling place to be.”



HBJ FILE PHOTO
The Connecticut Convention Center.

This, Aboulafia said, is a key factor in the dearth of mid-level professionals in the industry, which are needed to step into more [senior](#) roles soon, as the sector expects to lose about 20 percent of its workforce to [retirement](#) over the next few years.

That’s why it’s key for Connecticut to focus on maintaining a high-skilled workforce to sustain the edge it has over states that lack that kind of employee base, Aboulafia said.

“At the end of the day Connecticut is a high-cost state, so it rises and falls on the skills of its workforce,” Aboulafia said. “In terms of training initiatives: not bad, but could do better, heading in the right direction.”

At Wednesday’s event, which will feature more than 95 top aerospace manufacturers from Connecticut and Southwestern Massachusetts, Aboulafia

will talk about how he sees Connecticut's aerospace manufacturing industry faring in the near-term and beyond.

“My basic message is despite weakness in some sectors, despite some risks here and there, it's a pretty strong market right now,” Aboulafia said. “And the fundamental drivers are very much intact, so we're not anticipating a downturn anytime soon.”