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Dan Haar: A sluggish state looks to aerospace for a lift

By [Dan Haar](#)
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Colin Cooper, right, Connecticut's recently appointed manufacturing czar, talks with executives from the aerospace industry at the Aerospace Components Manufacturers' trade show and work force fair in Hartford Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2019. Photo: Dan Haar/Hearst Connecticut Media

Liz Clement was locked in, telling four high school students about great internships at Horst Engineering & Manufacturing Co., an aerospace supplier in East Hartford and South Windsor.

“We have people that are out on the shop floor and we have people in the engineering department,” Clement, the human resources manager, told the kids. “There’s definitely a lot of opportunity.”

As Connecticut’s economy goes, this was the rubber meeting the road, the tool cutting the metal or whatever cliché you want to plug in.

It was the “Aerospace Alley” trade show on Wednesday — an annual gathering of the Aerospace Components Manufacturers, with 95 companies showing their stuff. Twelve-hundred students, mostly in high schools, trekked up the escalators at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford to see whether this was an industry they could envision themselves joining.

You’d think it would be an easy sell. Here’s a well-paying industry that hasn’t seen a downturn in 15 years, led by two dominant, global brands — Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford and Sikorsky in Stratford — looking for a buzz in a state that hasn’t caught economic fire in twice that long.

There’s a lot of interest, for sure, but workers aren’t flocking to high-cost Connecticut for jobs and young people aren’t dreaming of aerospace, at least not in big enough numbers, the way they do for online gaming or environmental science.

Gov. Ned Lamont and David Lehman, his economic development commissioner, see that challenge. Both worked the crowd Wednesday along with Colin Cooper, a star in the industry in Connecticut who they just hired as the state’s new manufacturing czar.

Clearly, the jobs are there to be had. The aerospace sector, which Lehman called Connecticut’s most distinct industry cluster (measured by density of jobs and firms here compared with nationwide), has perhaps 5,000 jobs unfilled, maybe even more.

Submarines are not aerospace, of course, but Electric Boat in Groton is the third leg of the advanced manufacturing triad and it's also ramping up in an era of expansion.

So, will young people coming of age want these jobs enough to stay? Will job-seekers in other states — gulp — actually want to come to Connecticut?

Selling an industry

With unemployment at 3.6 percent, it's a buyer's market for jobs in technology and advanced manufacturing. Some would-be Connecticut machinists and engineers see opportunities elsewhere — states with magnet cities, states with lower costs, industries with more glitz.

“They make parts for bigger companies. We could be in the bigger companies designing the parts that they're making,” said Faith Chambers, 17, a senior at E.C. Goodwin Technical High School in New Britain, said after hearing Clement's pitch at Horst. She hoping to attend Roger Williams College in Rhode Island for engineering.

“I just feel like I should branch out and see more of the world,” she said.

Her friend Safran Shakur, also a senior, worries about repetitive work. “There are other trades that we could go into, like game designing,” he said.

Part of the issue is selling an industry that may well offer what these kids want.

The aerospace cluster comes together in some ways. For example, at the event Wednesday, the trade group signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate with seven similar groups in France, the Netherlands and Italy. But the companies don't jointly market the image of the industry as much as they should.

In the past they didn't have to — the giants attracted people to the state with apprenticeship programs, building up the whole industry. Many executives say Pratt, specifically, should crank that up again.

Some kids I spoke with are ebullient about the industry and about Connecticut. Patrick Milczanowski, a ninth-grader from Barkhamsted at Northwest Regional High School, thinks Connecticut is cool. “I’m looking into going into machining and there’s a lot here,” he said.

His own mother, Michelle Milczanowski, is in the “gotta get outta here” camp, having moved to Connecticut 20 years ago for her husband’s job, from Florida — which has no income tax, she said pointedly.

Urgent need for the state

Patrick’s grandfather worked at Kaman Corp., a storied aerospace company north of Hartford. Today, executives in the industry are clearly selling something that’s not your grandfather’s factory floor. It’s clean, varied, safe and interesting.

“I always say, get them into the shop because the shop sells,” said Tim Ulles, CEO of Numet, with 83 employees in Orange.

Can they attract people from out of state? I tapped into a hot debate over that question. Many say no, recruiters tell them no one wants to be in Connecticut because of high costs. Others say with the right marketing, yes — Connecticut is a great place to raise a family and these jobs pay well.

Michigan, among other states, has placed billboards in Connecticut seeking workers; why can’t Connecticut do the same in targeted states?

The industry has brought in salaried workers such as engineers from other states, but with only mixed results and not in a concerted effort — which it should do. Attracting hourly production workers from out of state is a different story altogether.

“It’s a concept that I think could work,” Ulles said. “I would pay lump-sum relo costs.”

We have the vast industry cluster now and the work is here but if we lose it, we won’t get it back, said Cooper, the manufacturing czar, who was one of the most successful aerospace

manufacturers, having spent 20 years building up Eastford-based Whitcraft LLC to 1,100 employees in several states.

“This is what we need to do, we need to have people immigrate into the state with skills,” Cooper said.

The need is clear. Over the last 12 months Connecticut’s overall economy has added only about 5,000 jobs, a sluggish year once again, though the 2019 numbers are subject to revisions in March that can be very large. About 22,000 more people are leaving Connecticut every year for other states than are moving here.

That “outmigration” is a crisis for the economy — which was discussed down Interstate 91 Wednesday at a data conference in New Haven.

Aerospace is a more immediate potential savior for Connecticut than biotech, insurance or financial services, though all play a role. Here’s a homegrown industry that’s doing great thanks to the global boom in commercial airline service and the U.S. taste for spending more on military hardware every year than the entire output of a small nation.

Filling the jobs from within the state could be as good as bringing in people from the outside and that, too, is a deep challenge Connecticut is trying to meet with a new crop of training programs. They’re much more targeted and industry-driven than in years past.

“I’m very confident we can get people to stay here for those jobs,” said Lehman, the economic development commissioner.