

Getting With The Program

Getting and keeping a work force capable of meeting the demands of the 21st century is one of the key challenges most U.S. manufacturers face today. That's not even news anymore. I — and others — have been talking about it in editorials and speeches for ten years now. It's also not news that the job is a tough one and that industry-wide response often has not been particularly effective.

But this is not a call to despair. It has taken time, but now some exciting responses are in the works. At the AGMA Annual Meeting this year, one particularly creative approach was outlined.

An organization called the National Tech Prep Network is addressing the challenge of creating a work force for the next century. The Tech Prep idea is a simple one: Employers and schools must work together to change the way we educate most of our students today.

The goal of Tech Prep is nothing less than changing the way Americans think and act about training people for jobs. We've always known that manufacturing jobs were not "dead ends" or just for "losers." Tech Prep wants to prove that to the people who will fill those jobs in the coming years, the students of today, and to those responsible for getting them started in the right direction, their teachers, parents and potential employers.

It's difficult to describe a typical "Tech Prep" program, because one of the beauties of the system is that each group that buys into the idea develops it in ways that meet its own particular needs.

For example, not too far from our editorial offices, over in northwestern Illinois, a group including local high schools, the regional community college and six area companies (including a major gear tool manufacturer) have established a Tech Prep Youth Apprenticeship Program. The program is a combination of rigorous academic study, on-the-job training, mentoring and counseling designed to provide students with "real world" experience and the necessary background to fill jobs in the high tech workplace.

It's important to note that the "school" part of this program is not a "remedial" one. Students get first-rate training that prepares them to work in the more demanding work environment of today.

Employers who contribute get the kind of trained force they desperately need. It's a win/win scenario for all concerned. (See page 14 for more information on Tech Prep.)

Of course, a program like Tech Prep requires an enormous commitment on the part of all involved. Educators have to be willing to make curriculum and program changes to meet the requirements of the industry sponsors. Students have to be committed to a lot of hard work to succeed in the program. Participating companies have to devote time, personnel, equipment, space and money to make the system work.

A tall order? No doubt. But talking to people involved in this experiment convinces me that this program and others like it have a good chance for success. Tech Prep is a realistic and effective response to a problem that needs addressing now. Some gear companies are already exploring these programs. The rest should follow suit.

Training a work force for the next century requires rethinking cherished assumptions, readjusting attitudes, and putting our time, money, capital and human resources where our mouths are. The trained work force we need is not going to arrive on our doorsteps gift-wrapped; we are going to have to go out and get it. We as employers hold a key piece of the trained work force puzzle — the specific knowledge of the kinds of skills we need and the ability to influence schools to provide it. Without our contribution through programs like Tech Prep, we remain part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Michael Goldstein
Michael Goldstein,
Editor-in-Chief



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