

Main Feature:

Worker 'Boot Camp' Kicks Up
Racine Area Employment Rate
By Saad Akbar Khan

Computer Numerical Control operation is a job skill in high demand among a large number of industrial settings. An innovative and collaborative "Boot Camp" is now available to address an increasingly difficult challenge for Racine area employers to find the skilled workers they need.

This situation peaked in the fall of 2004, when some 250 job openings were listed in the local newspaper. Mark Mundl, of the Racine County Workforce Development Center, took it as a professional challenge. "You know something's seriously wrong when unemployment and job availability both are high and rising," he says.

Mundl was not alone. Through a series of conversations and casual meetings, a team of workforce development professionals, technical college staff and business leaders formed to cooperatively develop workable solutions. The group came to see a strong need for a new kind of training program. They envisioned a program efficient at turning out skilled workers, but that also gives workers appropriate training in "soft skills." These skills might include maintaining a positive work ethic, understanding appropriate workplace behavior, or developing interpersonal skills needed to successfully address and resolve differences of opinions or misunderstandings that may arise on the job.

The group developed a model program, the CNC Boot Camp, a demand-driven curriculum to teach people with little or no advanced manufacturing experience how to program CNC machines. These units, each having an integrated computer to produce manufactured components, are used in a variety of applications, including automobile work, computer network routing and information technology.

The team shared this model with Southeast Wisconsin area manufacturers. Together, they examined and tweaked the program to assure that it thoroughly addressed the basic training needs for a CNC operator. Employers' feedback was incorporated directly into the curriculum. The result is a unique 14-week, 40 hours per week program.

The CNC Boot Camp, in a very short time, has gained national recognition as a good example of efficient and successful training. To date, the four completed Boot Camps have generated 39 certified CNC Operators and 10 non-certified operators. The program rigidly holds to its high standards for certification. Any student receiving a grade below a C in any class is not eligible for certification. The reputation of the Boot Camp is so high, however, that employers often hire non-certified graduates. The most recent Boot Camp reached full-capacity enrollment. Graduates have achieved an overall 94% employment rate.

According to Mundl: "The program not only teaches workers how to become CNC operators, but also how to perform well in ways that employers consider important when making decisions about retaining or promoting employees. That's the real unique feature here. The tech skills can get you in the door, but the other abilities help you stay on the job and offer you a greater chance of job and career advancement."

Mundl says that employers have wholeheartedly joined in on this new approach. "They give us feedback on the curriculum and send their staff to help our students. Their HR and tech people teach them interviewing skills through mock interviews," Mundl notes. Employers even have interviewing booths on hand at the certification completion ceremony. "They don't waste any time in hiring these high-demand graduates," Mundl notes.

The collaboration is the heart of the Boot Camp's success. "To make this work we need a strong, ongoing partnership involving business, workforce development, and the Gateway Technical College. That's the tripod on which this venture depends for survival," Mundl says.

Another unique quality of the CNC Boot Camp model is the diverse funding coalition supporting the effort. The Boot Camp receives funding from the Workforce Investment Act Adult and Dislocated Worker programs, the Trade Adjustment Act, City of Racine Community Development Block Grants, and individual students who pay their own fees.

What's next for the partners and the Boot Camps? Mundl explains: "An article in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel a while ago highlighted the intense need for welders in the greater Milwaukee area. We are creating a Welding Boot Camp. We're developing a welding lab. Gateway's existing welding equipment is in use all day, so we need to expand their capacity."

It appears the group came up with a hot idea that's about to get even hotter.

For further information on the Boot Camp model, contact Mark Mundl at Mark.Mundl@goRacine.org or at 262-638-6621.

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