

## Companies have jobs, seek skills

Virginia Annable Feb 17, 2018



EDWARD TERRY CCC&TI Mechanical Engineering student Nikki Kapetanis works with a Haas 5-axis milling machine in the college's engineering lab. Kapetanis, one of several engineering students who got jobs while finishing their degrees, works Timber Wolf Forest Products in Hudson.

Every day, Nikki Kapetanis works with robots.

The 18-year-old is a mechanical engineering student at Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, but a year before her scheduled graduation, she landed a job working with advanced machines and engineering design software at Timber Wolf Forest Products in Hudson, while still going to school.

That's because local companies are clamoring for workers like Kapetanis, who have advanced technical skills needed to run the equipment used in modern manufacturing.

Bemis Manufacturing Co. in Lenoir is one of those companies. Over the next seven years, nearly half of the technical workers at Bemis will reach retirement age, which could open about 30 jobs.

To prepare, Bemis is hunting for fresh faces, but there simply aren't enough people with the electrical and mechanical background needed for the high-tech plastics manufacturing plant, said Scott Adams, the plant's head process technician.

"We have a technical need at this plant that we have a hard time finding the technical skills for," Adams said.

The situation here reflects a national problem. Companies all over the county use advanced technology and are trying to grow while many of their current workers are heading toward retirement, said Deborah Murray, executive director of the Caldwell County Economic Development Commission.

"These manufacturing jobs we have are a different caliber than they used to be," Murray said. "It makes it difficult to replace the retiring workforce and find young people to join their companies."

Bemis' plant uses robots to make custom plastic pieces, and those robots need human hands to help. Adams looks for people with an interest and some training in science, technology, problem-solving and, if he gets so lucky, plastics.

"The process (we do here) is a technical process," Adams said. "Our technicians are required to know not only the fundamentals of plastics and polymers but also robotics. ... That's where we're having a hard time finding the skill set."

Companies including Bemis, Exela Pharma Sciences and Sealed Air Corp. are coming together with the EDC and CCC&TI to combat the problem.

That involvement is what got Kapetanis, 18, to where she is today.

In her freshman year at South Caldwell High School, Kapetanis took a drafting class and quickly found her calling in design and mechanics. She kept taking engineering-related classes in high school but didn't know what was next until a tour of CCC&TI's mechanical engineering training room.

Bemis and Exela donated advanced equipment for students to learn with, so they come out of programs with skills related to what the companies do. Kapetanis was in awe. Now working with those robots on a daily basis, she said they're essential for her training.

"It changes everything," she said. "You're getting your hands on machines you'll be using all through your career."

Companies also let the EDC and college know what they're looking for in a worker, and CCC&TI is listening, college President Mark Poarch said.

"We want to know the training they need for their incumbent workers and need for jobs they can't fill," Poarch said. "For example, if they have a certain need for a machine operator, we can develop short-term programs designed for a company."

A job listing in a CCC&TI newsletter is how Kapetanis landed her job at Timber Wolf, one she plans to keep after graduation. Through the college she has learned about opportunities in Caldwell County she didn't expect.

"I didn't actually know about the industry here. ... It turned out there were jobs in Caldwell County that needed my skills," she said.

Input from local companies has pushed the college to create a career center, where students can learn about careers and job openings in Caldwell County, Poarch said.

It's all about creating a pipeline for young people in Caldwell County to jump into jobs, Poarch, Murray and Adams agree. If kids in high school have an interest, there is a path for them to take, whether that's a four-year degree, a 90-day training program, the Caldwell Career Center Middle College or an apprenticeship in a company.

To get that process started in schools, Adams and Krista Bridgwood, human resources manager for Bemis, began speaking to public school classes about what the company does, hoping to pique students' interests, Bridgwood said.

"Some people have that hands-on technical aptitude that they can go to a community college and develop. ... We're working with them to say these are the skills we need for someone to come in and be successful," Bridgwood said.

The EDC is also going into schools, spreading that word that manufacturing in Caldwell is different than it used to be, Murray said. She wants to let students know they can make good money in safe, clean, advanced manufacturing environments that are different than where their parents worked. Caldwell went from a focus almost entirely on furniture and textiles to a diversified economy with a wide range of manufacturers, Murray said.

The opportunities for manufacturing work are far different now than even just 10 years ago, she said.

"Kids now should and can expect to do as well or better than their parent in Caldwell County ... because of the transformation in industry," Murray said, provided they set out to learn the skills they need.

The technology that manufacturers use is constantly changing, Murray said, which can make it difficult to train people for specific positions. Businesses, schools and local government are trying to fill positions that may be using completely different technology in five years.

"Technology puts us in a place where we have to respond in a nanosecond, while technology is changing even faster," Murray said.

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