

Networking

With new hires hard to come by, suppliers bring skills to the classroom

Michael Mecham

Rebounding quickly from the 2008-09 recession, passenger travel fed a big appetite for new aircraft. By 2010 suppliers were seeing good times ahead as Boeing planned four years of steadily increasing production rates.

Like many, AIM Aerospace scurried for new workers, providing on-the-job training (OJT) at its four factories in Seattle's Puget Sound region to keep pace with Boeing's demand for lavatories, seat shells, ceiling panels, ducting and other cabin parts. But by 2012, says AIM's vice president for operations, Jeff Moore, the company was in trouble. "Between February and May we hired and processed 437 employees through temporary agency-to-hire services in order to retain 100," he recalls.

Boeing hired 4,355 employees in Washington state last year, nearly all

Boeing's big Seattle, Renton and Everett factories are to the north in King and Snohomish counties, Pierce is populated with aerospace suppliers. It also is home to Boeing's Frederickson-based factory, an advanced machining center whose output includes the composite empennage for the 777. The county relies heavily on input from employers for a series of overlapping training programs aimed at providing skilled new hires and apprenticeships for a talent pool that it hopes will help keep aviation jobs from drifting away. The strategy is a microcosm of efforts being made across North America.

It is surprising how often job seekers and students overlook aerospace as a career in favor of new industries, such as software, says Bruce Kendall, president and CEO of the Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce

He began by teaching lead instructor Greg Rohr AIM's composite techniques and assembly processes so classroom instruction is "as close as we can get to industry standard," Rohr says.

Director Michelle Ledbetter notes that the regular classroom visits by Moore and others help acclimate students to a real-life work experience, as do shop floor field trips. "Students are surprised at how much of what we do is the exact thing at Boeing," she says. "It has a profound impact on them."

Bates Technical College and the Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee (AJAC) have taken the lead in pairing industry and frustrated job seekers by creating a Manufacturing Academy to offer a nine-week, 35-credit program to train certificated workers. Of 30 who take a week-long screening test, the 17 with the best computing skills and basic workplace knowledge—be on time, work well in teams—are selected. Their 8-hr. workday is set up like a job, "so they are in that mode," says Workforce Development Manager Jessica Neal-Smith. The goal is to produce graduates who "can walk onto a manufacturing floor and know exactly what they're looking at and how to use it," she says.

Student ages range from 19-60, but the majority are in their 30s. The academy, which is now starting its fourth

AIM Aerospace VP Jeff Moore (in suit jacket) and Pierce County Skills Center instructor Greg Rohr lead high school students on a factory tour.

apprentice group this month, boasts an 85% placement rate.

AJAC works statewide as a match-making service to where employers can find academy graduates to renew industry skill levels as baby boomers retire, says Executive Director Laura Hopkins. While most of the county's programs welcome Boeing, AJAC works only for smaller employers. "It's the suppliers who keep losing their people to Boeing that we're trying to help," she says.

Even after being hired, AJAC graduates continue taking night courses skewed to the academic needs of their new jobs. It will take a composite technician another two years, and a machinist four, to earn a journey-level certificate. "That's the really big deal, getting that certificate," Hopkins says.

"There are a lot of people who have been in the industry for 15-20 years who want that certificate."

Five years ago, there were 15 apprentices at Bates. Now there are 55, says Vice President of Instruction Cheri Loiland. Besides newcomers, the classes serve veterans who need to sharpen their skills. Many students



BATES TECHNICAL COLLEGE

JWD Machine, a multi-axis milling specialist, of Fife, Wash., supports Bates Technical College's apprenticeship program.

start by earning a CNC operator certificate, a 1.5-year endeavor that tells employers that they know how to load a computer numerical controlled ma-

chine, type in code, monitor the work and complete basic post-machining work such as drilling holes, says machinist instructor Bob Storrar.

General Plastics Manufacturing Co. Vice President Eric Hahn has worked closely with Clover Park Technical College and Workforce Central, a county administrator of federal jobs development funds, because he also needed workers to meet Boeing's and Airbus's rate build-ups. The company was hit hard by the recession but has filled about half the 80 jobs lost, relying on recalls for half of them. Now new recruits are his problem. About 60% of those hired do not last 90 days. Many cannot pass a basic grade 7 math test. Partnering with Clover and Workforce Central has been a big help. "It's a great example of a public-private partnership that really works," he says.

Technology Dean Andy Bird says Clover Park offers training in 11 aviation fields, the most of any technical college in the state. Courses range from traditional maintenance and pilot training to recent high-demand areas such as non-destructive testing (NDT) and composites.

It was Boeing Frederickson that bolstered the school's 2.5-year composites course. "We were trying to take control of our own destiny," says Operations Leader Steve Brewer, a member of Clover Park's board of directors. Attrition and transfers were eroding Frederick-



son's composite skills base, a key factor in 777 empennage work. To get Clover Park's composite courses started, Boeing provided internal training documents and advice on tools selection. The payback has been a "significant" shortening of its OJT times by using the school's graduates.

Other top suppliers, including Hexcel, AIM and General Plastics, followed Boeing to Clover Park. The school's 80 annual graduates earn certificates as aerospace composite technicians or the equivalent in NDT. Fifty-year-old students study alongside high schoolers in a "running-start program."

While Pierce County is showing progress in its industry training partnerships, Neal-Smith says financing is always an issue. So far, Manufacturing Academy programs are free for participating companies. But state legislators anticipate that companies will begin to provide financial support. Without it, the programs are vulnerable to budget cuts, she says. ☛



AIM AEROSPACE

of them in the Puget Sound area. Although AIM offers a 401(k) retirement plan, vacation pay and other benefits, it was losing some of its best employees to Boeing because it cannot match the behemoth's pay scales. Moore says AIM has learned to cope. "We developed processes that [new hires] can learn quickly."

AIM is based in Pierce County, population 800,000 and home to Tacoma, the state's third-largest city. Although

County. "You'd think it would be second nature [to students] because we are the home of Bill Boeing."

But it is not, and that is where government programs such as the Pierce County Skills Center come in. With the board's backing, it was started during the recession to help high school juniors and seniors learn job skills. Always looking for new opportunities, the center turned to Moore last fall to help it set up a composites program.