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Crafting a Skilled Workforce

Using a European-style apprenticeship program, Blum Inc. proactively develops the skilled workers it requires.

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By Jill Jusko

You can wring your hands and worry about finding skilled workers to fill your company's workforce needs or you can address the challenge. Manufacturer Blum Inc., which employs about 350 people at its Stanley, N.C., plant near Charlotte, has done the latter.

The company, which produces lift systems, concealed hinges and drawer runner systems for kitchen cabinets, creates the skilled workforce it requires with the aid of a comprehensive apprenticeship program that guarantees participants a job upon completion. The apprenticeship program, named Apprenticeship 2000, develops many of the skilled manufacturing technicians Blum might otherwise be unable to find readily.

"We recognized we could not grow the business without this," says Andreas Thurner, manager of the apprenticeship program at Blum. He describes the program as reminiscent of the European model of apprenticeships, where opportunities to learn under the guidance of skilled practitioners are more common. Maybe not surprisingly, Blum Inc. is part of the larger Julius Blum GmbH, a family-owned company based in Austria.

Blum's need for highly skilled workers becomes readily apparent upon entry to its 450,000-square-foot facility. The factory is heavily automated along the entire assembly process and many of its component parts also are produced at the site. For example, stamping and injection molding of parts occurs at the plant, which also has a large automated warehouse. Employees not only run the equipment, but they also maintain and repair the majority of it, as well as build dies.

"We're not just button pushers here," Thurner says.

Apprenticeship 2000 is robust. Apprentices receive 8,000 hours of training in manufacturing skills, both classroom training and hands-on work experience at area firms. (Blum has a dedicated lab for apprenticeship training that includes some \$1.8 million in training equipment, as well as full-time trainers and mentors.) Successful graduates receive an associate's degree in manufacturing technology, journeyman certification from the North Carolina Department of Labor, and they earn a paycheck while they learn.

The program offers career paths for tool and die makers, electronics technicians, CNC machinists, machine technicians, mold/plastics technicians and welding fabricators.

Blum has nine apprentices currently employed at its N.C. manufacturing plant. Typically the company recruits from area high schools, and recruits must have a minimum 2.5 grade point average.

Apprenticeship 2000 celebrated its 15th anniversary last November. While Blum Inc. initiated the program, it now includes many partner organizations. Timken, Ameritech Die & Mold Inc., and, most recently, Siemens are among the Charlotte-area manufacturing firms participating in the program. Key participants include Central Piedmont Community College, the N.C. Department of Labor, and the local school districts from which the program recruits.

Successful graduates at Blum also have a guaranteed job with a minimum starting salary of \$34,000, yet they are not required to sign a contract guaranteeing they will stay for any length of time. That said, some 80% of its graduates are still with Blum, the company says.

The apprenticeship training is a costly endeavor for the company, Thurner admits. The average investment per apprentice exceeds \$100,000 over the four-year program. On the other hand, growing the business requires not only investment in equipment and technologies, but "you need to invest in your people as well," he says.

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