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A Machinist By Any Other Name

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

My past few columns have focused on the Upper Valley's manufacturing industry, its sizable contribution to the region's economy, and the looming shortage of machinists.

In this concluding column of the manufacturing series, I want to focus on the machinist training resources in the region, and revisit the conundrum of the machinist's image.

The Machine Technology Program, housed at Claremont's Sugar River Valley Regional Technical Center, is the largest facility in the region with an annual capacity of between 40 and 45 machinists. Scott Pope, who heads up this program, reminds me of the quintessential Swiss watchmaker with his attention to detail.

Well equipped, bright and spotlessly clean, Pope's classroom provides hands-on training on a variety of machine tools. Besides a solid grounding in traditional machining skills, Pope also teaches students how computer-controlled machine-tools work, and he hones their geometry and measurement skills to prepare them for the world of precision machining.

On the Vermont side, the Machine Tool Program at the River Valley Technical Center/Howard Dean Education Center in Springfield provides training in basic machining as well as on computer controlled tools. It is set up to train 16 students a year, "but low enrollment rates mean we will only graduate between four and eight this year," Christopher Grey, the instructor told me.

Both programs are accredited by the National Institute for Metalworking Skills. The accreditation is given only when the instructors and the school system meet NIMS' rigorous benchmarks, which also take into account the support of a region's industry for the training program. Only 125 schools and colleges nationwide have been so accredited, and the recognition will give Pope's and Grey's students enormous credibility with prospective employers.

Also on the New Hampshire side, the startup Tool & Technology Resource Center in Newport has begun signing up its first batch of students.

Chris Arnold, TTRC's director, explained that his facility will focus on teaching with table-top computerized tools and a blend of Internet and classroom instructions. Mathematics, precision gauging and computer-controlled machine-tools--the

prerequisites for today's high-technology machining profession -- are at the heart of TTRC's curriculum. Both Pope and Arnold are already collaborating to use the best from each other's facilities, and to prevent duplication.

These three facilities comprise the bulk of the Upper Valley's machinist training assets, their total annual output is less than one-fifth of the area's projected requirements of around 500 machinists every year for the next decade and beyond. These resources are augmented by training programs run in-house by manufacturing companies, but this is an expensive and inefficient way to provide basic machining education because it pulls the most talented machinists off the production floor for teaching duties.

The training programs, however, can only come into play once there is a pool of students who have become interested in becoming machinists. And there's the rub -- machining is not on most students' radar screen, not in the Upper Valley and not nationally.

As these columns have shown, one of the biggest reasons for this shortage is a misperception about what manufacturing is all about today.

"During the '50s and '60s, everyone understood that our quality of life was determined by manufacturing," Jerry Jasinowski, president of the Manufacturing Institute, told me. "But manufacturers, and society in general, just failed to keep up with the extent to which manufacturing was being transformed into a high-technology industry."

The MI is the education and research arm of the National Association of Manufacturers, and works to raise understanding among policy-makers and the media about modern manufacturing in America and spur greater interest in manufacturing careers.

The Institute conducts national research on this subject and projects a shortage of 13 million to 15 million machinists by 2020 unless present trends are reversed. Under Jasinowski's guidance, the institute recently developed a campaign called "Dream It. Do It." to address the looming machinist shortage by expanding education and training opportunities.

"We recently launched this campaign in Kansas City, Missouri, as a joint effort with Monster (the online recruiter), the American Association of Community Colleges, and the College Board in Kansas City and will replicate it around the country," Jasinowski said.

Could the Upper Valley be a candidate for the campaign as it is rolled out nationally? "It requires a serious commitment on the part of business, academia, local and state governments and civic leaders, and a commitment to share the cost, but we are looking for candidates," he told me.

For those aspiring to leadership in the Upper Valley the campaign's Web site is at: <http://www.dreamit-doit.com>.

I asked Jasinowski if replacing "machinist" with a more up-to-date term might help correct the perception deficit? "You may be right," Jasinowski said. "So-called machinists now are at a much higher level technically than in the past, and do things which used to be done by engineers."

Perhaps the area's manufacturing industry should take up this challenge, and launch a

competition to find a replacement for “machinist.” I want to make sure and get in on that jackpot with my humble contribution -- wouldn't you like to be a “precision components engineer”?

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's “business climate,” focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

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