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NEXT GENERATION OF ASSEMBLY BEGINS HERE

Regional business and government representatives are always searching for new ways to boost community investment and employment. For several Davidson County organizations, the “new” strategy is simply a different outlook on one of the region’s staple industries: manufacturing.

The product of this strategy is the High Performance Manufacturing Association (HPMA), a strategic partnership formed in January 2012 between both the Lexington Area and Thomasville Area chambers of commerce, and Davidson County Community College (DCCC). HPMA functions as a focus group specifically for the industry, aimed at providing a welcoming business climate, an educated workforce and ongoing training opportunities so one of the county’s main economic drivers can flourish.

“The name of the group certainly reflects the mission and direction of the program,” says Doug Croft, president of the Thomasville Area Chamber of Commerce. “We are proud to be a traditionally historic manufacturing community.”

Xceldyne is a major player in local manufacturing.



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Workers learn state-of-the-art manufacturing both at local colleges and on the job.

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Croft also says that while companies continue to diversify, programs like this one makes the manufacturing industry that much stronger.

Anyone in the community can attend an HPMA event at a cost of only \$20. The workshops, held every four to six weeks at varying locations such as PPG Fiberglass Products and CV Products/Xceldyne Industries, have seen rapidly increasing attendance, with anywhere from 80 to 120 participants per session. The association’s goal is to help both businesses and the communities stay competitive and improve manufacturing methodologies.

It is a strategy that seems to already be bearing fruit. Tom Johnson, director of operations for CV Products/Xceldyne Technologies and current chairman of the HPMA, noted that there was a slight increase in manufacturing activity in the county over the final quarter of 2011 and the first quarter of 2012.

Part of the HPMA strategy must include making up for what Johnson admits were heavy losses in the county’s furniture and textile manufacturing industries during the last decade. This includes addressing the long-term needs of facilities in Davidson County.

Right now, the HPMA is focusing on preparing the county for an influx of manufacturing jobs that demand new and more sophisticated skills from local workers.



Photo courtesy of DCCC



Photo by GeoCore Films



Photo by GeoCore Films

The problem modern manufacturers face, says Randy Ledford, dean of DCCC's School of Business, Engineering and Technical Studies, is that because of new technologies, workers need an entirely new set of skills.

"Unfortunately, most of those who are unemployed in Davidson County currently do not have the technical skill set for the new manufacturing processes," Ledford says.

That is poised to change, however. In 2011, DCCC received a series of grants totaling just more than \$3 million to build a series of nine advanced manufacturing labs on campus, the most advanced of which includes several types of computer numerical control (CNC) machines.

A large part of the grant money came in due to a U.S. Department of Labor initiative to help build capacity at the community college level for the next generation of the manufacturing workforce.

"We're now one of the few schools in the state of North Carolina that has this breadth of variety of machines in one lab," Ledford. "When students leave here and go to work for a manufacturer, like Xceldyne for instance, they will have already worked with [that company's] types of machines at our school."

"The DCCC labs have been a huge benefit to the area," says Johnson. "That was one of the key components we were missing. Not too many companies have apprenticeships

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DCCC's Advanced Manufacturing Lab drew a visit from Vice President Joe Biden.

anymore and on-the-job training is too complicated for a lot of manufacturers to try to support with this advanced equipment.

“What DCCC has is even more sophisticated than what I have [at CV Products/Xceldyne],” he continues. “So, as I get more updated equipment at the company I can send my people to the DCCC labs and have them trained there.” Johnson says he has a goal of training at least 25 current employees by the end of 2012.



Photo by GeoCore Films

Local firms have easy access to material and technology.

Both the HPMa and the new programs at DCCC reflect Ledford's enthusiastic assertion: “Manufacturing is not dead. It is transforming.” ■ *By Ryan Newhouse*

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