

Internship Draft Days, and Other Regional Workforce Partnership Ideas

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If a career in manufacturing generated the same hype as a football player’s rookie season, would it be easier for manufacturers to recruit the talent they need?

One regional workforce development partnership in the manufacturing heart of the Midwest is betting it will, and demonstrating the power of working together to address the skills gap in the process.

With more than 250 member companies, the Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing Alliance ([NEWMA](#)) employs 34 percent of the workforce in the region surrounding Green Bay and Wisconsin’s Fox River Valley. Executive Director Ann Franz says the coalition was organized largely to address the growing shortage of skilled workers, targeting students in the K-12 age range in an attempt to change their perceptions of the manufacturing field.

“How will they know what they don’t know?” Franz asks. “Unless manufacturers come together and speak in a unified voice, how’s anything going to change?”



With daunting labor statistics, Franz made the case for regional workforce development partnerships in an [AEM-sponsored webinar](#), and provided unique examples of how her organization is moving the needle.

NEWMA's Internship Draft Day at Lambeau Field

In the heart of Green Bay Packers country, what could be more appropriate than a Green-and-Gold-draped celebration of young entrants into the manufacturing workforce?

Set in the historic confines of Lambeau Field, [NEWMA's Internship Draft Day](#) channels the pomp and circumstance of the NFL draft into prepping young workers for a career in manufacturing. Regional companies use the event to recruit internship and co-op participants, conducting 15-minute interviews with more than 250 students from technical, two-year, community and four-year college campuses throughout Wisconsin and Michigan.

Companies rank the students they interview, and at the end of the event, officials from the Green Bay Packers franchise announce the number one "draft pick" from each school, who also receives a scholarship. Franz says it's an exciting event for employers and candidates alike.



"It's a wonderful way for our members to identify talent," Franz says. "Plus now we have a database of hundreds of resumes that we can go back and look at for full-time employment."

How NEWMA Works With Local School Districts to Build Its Workforce Pipeline

If the talent shortage seems bad now, Franz reminds employers that, unless positive steps are taken, things will only get bleaker as more Baby Boomers exit the workforce for retirement. The best way to replace them, she says, is to invest in getting the next generation of workers excited about manufacturing—and that means meeting them where they are today.

"We can't just point our fingers at schools and say they're doing it wrong," Franz says. "We really need to approach schools as a partner in these efforts."

For NEWMA, Franz says that process started with a series of listening sessions. Industry leaders with the organization invited local math teachers to come and share their thoughts on the challenges they face, the barriers to career exploration and subjects on which they could work together.

"One teacher said he was so sick and tired of kids raising their hands and asking when they're going to use this in the real world?" Franz says.



That inspired the organization to produce a series of videos, **Get Real Math**, in which industry professionals demonstrate how they use specific math concepts in their day-to-day jobs. The videos are tailored to a variety of grade levels and concepts, and are available free online for anyone to use.

Other valuable tools include magazine stories and career days, which allow students to hear from employees, in their own words, how they find fulfillment in their manufacturing careers.

Making the Case for a Regional Workforce Development Partnership

In a little more than a decade, the Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing Alliance has already started moving the needle significantly in the right direction. On top of high profile successes like the Internship Draft Day and the Get Real Math videos, local technical colleges have seen nearly 200-percent growth in enrollment in machine degree programs, and nearly 400-percent growth in welding program enrollment.

Executive Director Ann Franz believes that success can be replicated in other regions around the country. All it takes is strong leadership from the manufacturing sector, a willingness to work together as a region, and an understanding that employers must focus on long-term workforce development.

“By engaging with and investing in K-12, you can grow the pipeline of talent in your region, plus you can lead and direct that future workforce,” Franz says.

Workforce development is among the key topics discussed at AEM's series of Thinking Forward events. For more information regarding upcoming AEM Thinking Forward events and locations, visit <https://www.aem.org/think/>.

To help proactively attract potential talent and bring awareness to the industry, AEM has developed a toolkit for manufacturers and industry partners to use in outreach to their local schools and communities recruiting the next generation of skilled workers. The toolkit can be accessed at <http://www.aem.org/workforce-development-toolkit/>.

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