

## **Manufacturing partnership links business and education together**

Ask Vic Kissell about the Regional Advanced Manufacturing Center in Keene and he will respond by asking how much does a reporter want to know and how long does he have.

"I'm known as the RCAM man," said Kissell, the senior manufacturing supervisor at Keene-based Tidland Corp., who began beating the public drum for a specialized training program four years ago. "It's been a long path to get to this point."

Launched in February 2010, RCAM is believed to be the only worker training program of its kind in the country. Its future success depends in large part on a major cooperative effort between different education levels and a manufacturing business community determined to survive and thrive in the Monadnock Region. But that depends on a labor force with the right skills.

"To sum it all, in the high-tech manufacturing industry there are more positions available than qualified applicants," Kissell explained. "It's detrimental to the bottom line."

The shortage of skilled workers for the advanced manufacturing sector is a frequently mentioned concern of business leaders throughout the state and the country, but in the Keene area, a unique public-private coalition came together to find a solution.

"We have a unique opportunity here," said Norm Fisk, who was recently named the first executive director of RCAM. "The opportunity to train and position people from all over the state for robust jobs in precision manufacturing is gratifying."

Fisk, an experienced manufacturing industry engineer who teaches at Keene State College, said in particular he's never heard of the level of cooperation and integration that the RCAM model has created - a multi-level partnership between the college, River Valley Community College in Keene, the Keene School District, and the Greater Keene Chamber of Commerce.

### **Building a partnership**

Fisk said RCAM's mission is to link business and education resources to establish and support a supply chain of highly trained professionals for a new generation of precision manufacturing jobs.

"My view is that we can be extremely flexible and use a number of resources to provide a robust supply of trained employees," Fisk said.

Kissell said that a few decades ago there were training programs to help workers upgrade their skills. "A lot of programs fizzled out and things got quiet between manufacturing and educational system," he said. "It was nobody's fault, but it was all our responsibility."

Tidland, which makes specialized winding machinery parts, was planning to expand its Keene facility a few years ago and Kissell was asked if they could find enough qualified workers to keep up with the increasing product demand.

"I said, 'Of course,' but in reality I knew that we were getting a lot of entry-level applicants who didn't have the skills we needed," he said.

In particular, most don't have the basic math and science skills necessary for the type of on-the-job training that was typical three decades ago when young workers like Kissell started their careers.

"So many times the manufacturing businesses in the region end up stealing each other's employees. It hurts the industry and drives up labor costs," he said.

Even today, Kissell said the company could fill three slots immediately with properly trained workers.

The Monadnock Region is home to more than 70 high-tech manufacturing companies.

Kissell and other business leaders began working with the Keene Chamber of Commerce, the high school and college-level institutions in the area to create what eventually led to RCAM. The issue was such a priority at the state level that Kissell was among those prodded by Gov. John Lynch and lawmakers such as Sen. Molly Kelly, D-Keene, to establish an advanced manufacturing education advisory council.

Fisk said that RCAM, which is based at Keene State College, offers educational and training opportunities for new students seeking career opportunities and experienced workers in transition.

By providing access to essential technological equipment and laboratories, Fisk explained, the program encourages skill development and lifelong learning while supporting real-time and real-world experience in the emerging manufacturing sector.

RCAM's educational partners are working with area businesses to create curricula to provide educational pathways that mesh with the needs of the business community.

Fisk said the linked levels of education will include high school preparatory courses, corporate-sponsored professional development classes, certification programs, and two- and four-year degree programs. Ideally, this will give students and workers opportunities to further their education and advance in their careers.

## **Career outlook**

Kissell and other RCAM members have already begun an extensive fundraising effort. He said the success so far reflects the need RCAM fills and the desire to make it work. To date, they have raised \$500,000 through grants, corporate gifts and individual donations that will go to buying state-of-the-art equipment for a new training laboratory that will be based at a new building at Keene State scheduled to open in 2012.

"This partnership will ready the Monadnock Region to compete in the next economy by linking business and education resources to establish and support a talent supply chain for a new generation of precision manufacturing jobs," said Keene State College President Helen Giles-Gee last year.

She cited the college's Rapid Prototype Laboratory as an example of the high-technology learning environment RCAM will provide to students and workers.

RCAM has launched its training effort, which could grow to 14 full-time jobs, for workers who complete the program to become skilled CNC machinists - those who run computer numerically controlled machines used in advanced manufacturing.

Developed in partnership with River Valley Community College, four employers will participate in the free training program - Corning NetOptics, New Hampshire Ball Bearings, Tidland Corp. and Knappe & Koester.

Depending on the sponsoring employer, the machinist positions will be for first-, second- and third-shift operations. The starting wage will be \$12 per hour with full benefits, with the potential to incrementally increase over two years to \$14 to \$16 per hour based on individual performance.

Kissell said that the interest is out there. Some 240 people applied for acceptance, and after a cut brought it down to 49, he said the companies identified 14 candidates they would hire. They were accepted and put into the intensive eight-week program to become CNC machinists.

"It's a huge opportunity to get a new career," Kissell said.

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