

POLK MANUFACTURING ASSOCIATION

Manufacturing association promotes county growth

If We Build It...



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Susan Clayton Black holds a laptop computer that controls a miniature farm tank for training purposes while Ernie Helms, right, watches at the Polk Community College Airside Center in Lakeland on Wednesday, March 25, 2009.

BARTOW - A panel of manufacturing industry representatives formed four years ago as a requirement for receiving grant funding for the PCC Corporate College has developed into an association promoting manufacturing and economic growth in the county. With about two dozen member companies, the Polk Manufacturing Association continues to support the PCC Corporate College as it looks to attract more affiliates. Members include large companies like Country Hearth, Coca-Cola and Publix as well as smaller manufacturers such as Allied Scrap, American Lokring, and Treatt USA.

According to Executive Director Susan Black, who donates her time and expertise to the PMA, the organization's programs are growing. Its calendar includes quarterly meetings featuring nationally known speakers that are held at member businesses on a rotating basis. There also are quarterly plant tours of member businesses and newly planned special interest group meetings. Black said members also receive notification of training opportunities available and have input in the type of training they need. "Employers are finding that this organization has what they need for business success," Black said. "It has so much potential to be a great trade asset. "The whole purpose of the organization was to provide training opportunities for manufacturing companies through grants but now it is time for us to grow," Black said.

Organized by consultant Dick Pelligrini of the executive consulting firm Pilgrim Associates, the manufacturers involved in the original panel provided input and support in developing programs for PCC Corporate College, a function the association continues to serve. "Dick pulled in manufacturers. It helps to have the industry buy in," said Ernie Helms, program coordinator for the college's manufacturing training. "It grew with his vision from an advisory group with a few members to a manufacturing association."

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Pelligrini describes the relationship between the manufacturers and the PCC Corporate College as "somewhat symbiotic." Helms agrees. "Our goal is career and technological education with quick delivery of a skill opportunity," he said of the college.

Manufacturing firms support the college in several ways - indicating types of skills they need in employees, donating funds and equipment, providing instructors and making presentations to classes about aspects of their businesses. They also provide representatives to sit on the board of directors, provide written and video testimonials to promote joint PCC and PMA projects and encourage their employees to take skills certification classes offered at the college.

"I got involved with the PMA at the onset because I wanted to make sure that the tax dollars being provided in grants to PCC Corporate College were spent for the long-term benefit of Polk County residents and the manufacturing community," said co-chairman Steve Kullberg, director of operations for Florida's Natural. "It has been gratifying to see my thoughts incorporated into the programs developed by PCC Corporate College."

In return for their participation in PMA, manufacturers receive first chance at training opportunities for employees and a pool of well-trained, skilled potential employees from which to choose. Eileen Holden, president of Polk Community College, said the relationship between the PCC Corporate College and PMA is a good example of partnerships between public and private entities. "When the public and private sectors come together, things can happen," Holden said. "It strengthens our ability to leverage resources - human, financial and physical. It makes sense to pool these resources."

Pelligrini said the partnership between PMA and PCC Corporate College provides \$3 million worth of high-skilled training in the county.

Strength in numbers

"I think that by working together, the manufacturers of this county can be much stronger. When we try to attack the challenges that we face as individual companies we have many limitations," Kullberg said. "But together we can build a very strong and competitive manufacturing community." Kullberg said Florida's Natural has reaped benefits, from \$200,000 worth of training through the PMA, networking with other manufacturers and sending representatives to events sponsored by the affiliated organizations Manufacturers Association of Florida and Manufacturers of Central Florida. "We have been able to network with people with similar challenges and find common solutions about staffing, training and regulatory issues," he said. And working together to plan mutually beneficial training for employees provides an efficient, cost-effective way to improve skill levels. "When we work together with other facilities, we can get advanced technical training at an affordable cost and without travel expense," Kullberg said. "This is a win-win situation for all involved."

And manufacturers have a greater voice when they speak out together about issues common among them. "The PMA is also working with the MAF and MACF to provide legislative direction to our elected representatives on issues that are important to the manufacturing community," Kullberg said. "An informed and unified manufacturing community can have a great impact on the political process."

Rob Clancey, director of the PCC Corporate College, said that many in the manufacturing industry do not understand the value of PMA. "I think the small companies aren't getting the idea of the PMA," said Clancey, citing its benefits of grant money and training. "The sharing and networking are of tremendous value to them." Black is planning new programs, compiling a member database and coordinating activities with the college. "We're looking to grow the PMA," Helms said.