

## **Are You Ready to Partner?**

*Community and Technical Colleges and State Universities are  
Ready and Eager to Support Manufacturing  
By Erick Ajax*

In the summer of 2008, the Minnesota State College and University Board and Chancellor James H. McCormick gave all of its 32 college and university presidents a challenging assignment: To go out into the community, meet with private sector employers, and find out how higher education could help enhance the prosperity and quality of life of the state's residents now and in the future. The presidents responded with enthusiasm, meeting with 352 business leaders. Of those, 170 came from manufacturing, with others representing health care, energy, and the broad spectrum of Minnesota business and industry.

From this wealth of information, higher education leaders crafted four recommendations. As a private-sector employer who has worked closely with a number of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, I have first-hand experience of their commitment to all four of these important tasks and some examples of activities already taking place.

### **Recommendation 1: Strengthen courses and programs to ensure students learn emerging skills identified by employers.**

This summer, the already impressive Hennepin Technical College M-Powered metal-stamping lab will be improved with the installation of state-of-the-art Smartpac 2 Punch Press Automation Controllers. The equipment was donated by industry partners, including Wintriss Honeywell. The curriculum was developed in conjunction with the Precision Metalforming Association (PMA) and Vincennes University.

Over the next six to twelve months, the equipment will be used to train incumbent workers from M-Powered partners like Bermo, Morrissey, Greatbatch, Rotation, EJ Ajax, Top Tool, Thomas and Meier, helping to improve our safety, productivity and quality. When our companies begin hiring again, this new machinery and curriculum will be ready and waiting to prepare entry-level workers. .

At other state colleges and universities, programs are turning out wind energy technicians, ethanol plant operators and other workers with skills needed to fuel emerging energy and green manufacturing technologies.

### **Recommendation 2: Expand internship and apprenticeship options for students and on-the-job training programs for employees.**

My colleague Dan McGee, who came to EJ Ajax as a student intern from Minneapolis Community and Technical College four years ago, has been moving steadily up the career ladder as a sheet metal fabricator. Many of our incumbent workers have made college coursework a component of our Class A journeyworker apprenticeship program, along with skills credentials and certification from the National Institute for Metalforming Skills (NIMS). This 21<sup>st</sup> century apprenticeship doesn't just measure hours of on-the-job training. Workers also must pass both written exams and skills demonstrations.

Partnerships work both ways. Just recently, two EJ Ajax toolmakers were introduced to a new vertical milling CNC machine while taking a class at Hennepin Technical College. They brought EJ Ajax leadership to the college to see the equipment and were able to demonstrate a 12-month return on investment from a purchase of the machine. The presentation was impressive, and the machine was installed at EJ Ajax in July 2009.

**Recommendation 3: Strengthen relationships with local businesses through outreach, communication and collaborations.**

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system is a leader in collaborating with business and industry, not just in the state of Minnesota, but nationally, as well. Chancellor McCormick and Board members travel the country, speaking to organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) Business Champions and the 1,200-member American Association of Community Colleges about the role higher education must play in producing a skilled workforce.

Another example is the M-Powered program, which has graduated more than 300 skilled workers in metalforming and plastics manufacturing, and is a partnership of no fewer than eight organizations, including the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, the Precision Metalforming Association, and HIRED, a nonprofit workforce development organization.

Another unique partnership began this past winter when more than a dozen emergency responders from the northeast Twin Cities metropolitan area came to Hennepin Tech for an evening of machine extrication training. Instructors with both manufacturing and firefighting experience provided critical information on how to respond safely and effectively when called to a manufacturing site. This training is already scheduled for other Minnesota communities.

**Recommendation 4: Expand education program offerings to include more experience-based learning, online courses and other flexible options.**

Hennepin Technical College's Customized Training Department has responded to the current economy with a flexible learning approach called WorkFast. Created in partnership with industry as well as dislocated worker programs throughout the Twin Cities, the WorkFast programs provide entry-level skills or skills upgrades, targeted in areas where demand still exists. While WorkFast forklift training requires no previous training or work experience, CNC Swiss turning is offered as a skills upgrade for workers with documented machining experience. The Building Operator Certification is designed for people who have worked in building maintenance for at least two years.

Programs like WorkFast will enable workers to be lifelong learners, upgrading their skills efficiently and cost-effectively.

**A Recommendation for Readers**

I'd like to respond to these four recommendations with a call to action for the readers of Manufacturing Success: Let's all do our part to make sure that these worthy proposals are implemented. If you are lucky enough to be a Minnesota company, reach out your nearest Minnesota State Colleges and Universities campus (you can find a list at [www.mnscu.edu](http://www.mnscu.edu)).

Those of you elsewhere in the Midwest may also have a state college and university system that is eager for your input and support.

We can help by communicating clearly the skills we need now. As time and resources permit, we can also provide qualified instructors, serve on boards and committees, and donate supplies and equipment as needed.

In addition, make sure that your legislators and lawmakers understand the importance of funding for first-class, affordable post-secondary education. In a time when most business owners are focusing closely on ensuring our day-to-day survival, we need organizations like our publicly supported state colleges and universities to take the long view. Successful implementation of their recommendations will help ensure that, when the economy turns around, we will have the pool of skilled workers our region needs for continued growth.