

Baby boomers' retirements create gap in trade work

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Brandon Bartson, (left), works uses a machine to make details on a plastic bottle mold Wednesday at Century Die Co. in Fremont while Gene Baker gives him advice.

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FREMONT — Thirty-five years ago, Tim Myers started learning about the tool and die industry as an apprentice at Whirlpool.

Experienced workers taught him everything from machine repair to complicated die components. At the same time, he took classes at Terra State Community College.

Four years later, he finished the apprenticeship with a tool and die maker journeyman certificate and on-the-job experience. That helped him to make a career in manufacturing, and today he is co-owner of Century Die Co., which makes blow molds for plastic bottles.

“A highly skilled craftsman takes time, training and experience,” Myers said. “Through the apprenticeship, this knowledge and wisdom attained over many years, most often decades, can be handed off and shared with the young or new craftsman by those who have spent a career gaining this experience.”

Myers and the staff at Century Die are passing their knowledge on to a new generation of workers. Apprentice Brandon Bartson, of Burgoon, started working there this month and another apprentice is scheduled to start in August.

Bartson, 31, is doing his apprenticeship through Terra State Community College, where he is taking classes and receiving on-the-job training and pay.

Century Die Co. is one of many manufacturing and skilled trades businesses across the state taking advantage of apprenticeship programs. They’ll need trained workers to fill a massive void expected in the coming years as Baby Boomers retire.

The state of Ohio expects to see 3,898 construction and trades jobs — including electricians, plumbers and tool and die makers — come open because of retiring workers annually through 2020, according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Gap in workers

The shortage in workers is across the board in the skilled trades, including construction, plumbing, heating

and cooling and manufacturing, said Andrew Maciejewski, assistant bureau chief of employment and training at OJDFS' Office of Workforce Development.

The perception of factory work and the changing nature of the jobs have contributed to the gap, those interviewed said.

For years, manufacturing was viewed by some as an undesirable job that included manual labor and sometimes uncomfortable work, said Ben Johnson, ODJFS spokesman.

"Manufacturing is tainted, as far as perception by the public," Myers said. "The perception is manufacturing is a dirty job. The reality of it is most manufacturing jobs are good careers, well-paying careers."

Today, factories are clean and have high safety standards, Myers said. Much of the work is highly technical and involves computers, specific training and knowledge.

Starting pay in skilled trades can range from \$15 to \$30 an hour, said Amy Below, coordinator of apprentice and industrial training at Terra's Kern Center.

Bridging the gap

The state and colleges, like Terra State, are working to shrink this gap. Apprenticeship programs are one of the popular ways to do that.

Apprenticeships aren't new. They've been around since the '30s, and they've remained popular and grown recently because they are a way for older, knowledgeable workers to pass on their skills, said Patrick Reardon, interim executive administrator for the Ohio State Apprenticeship Council.

Registered apprenticeships are done through the state and involve schooling and on-the-job training. They last one to five years, he said.

There are 447 registered apprentices in Ottawa and Sandusky counties, Johnson said.

Additional training

Another way companies are filling the void of skilled workers is by taking current employees and giving them more training, Below said.

Terra offers workforce development classes for businesses to send workers. Workers at Whirlpool Corp. in Clyde and Autoplas in Bellevue recently finished a hydraulic trouble-shooting class.

Terra also takes the training to the customers. The college does training for Whirlpool Corp. in Marion and businesses in multiple counties, and offers video training for General Mills.