

Youth Apprenticeship at MACHINE SPECIALTIES INC.

Machine Specialties Inc. (MSI) has been manufacturing precision parts since 1969. They are a leading contract machining and metal finishing specialist that designs and manufactures sophisticated, cost-effective solutions for their customers. In 1978, they increased for the first time to 7,500 square feet. MSI has since expanded several times, and their latest relocation into their new facility in Whitsett, N.C. more than triples their space to 150,000 square feet. To meet the challenges of expanding their workforce, MSI created a registered youth apprenticeship program to create their own recruiting pipeline.

Like many advanced manufacturers around the United States, MSI was facing challenges in growing the size of their workforce to meet production demand. Tammy Simmons, Vice President of Marketing & Culture for MSI, said

"Anybody in my line of work, my customers, and other people that are doing advanced manufacturing know that the pickings are slim for these skilled positions."



Apprentice Jacques quality inspecting trusses at the Machine Specialties facility in Guilford County.

With the help of Apprenticeship 2000, a highly respected consortium in Mecklenburg County, MSI spearheaded the creation of a new consortium in Guilford County with nine other advanced manufacturers for the purpose of promoting youth apprenticeship.

Representatives for the consortium goes to different high schools in the area to recruit pre-apprentices. They give presentations about the debt-free career opportunities that an apprenticeship offers to students and their families. MSI also hosts an orientation for students and their parents to visit and learn more about the youth apprenticeship. Over time, word-of-mouth has become one of the most effective recruiting tools for MSI, with students learning youth apprenticeship opportunities from their friends, family and school counselors.

The recruiting process for MSI's youth apprenticeship program is highly selective. They look closely at student's math grades and attendance records. If a student is interested and has the proper qualifications, they are invited to participate in a 6-week summer internship. Students are not only evaluated by the quality of their work, but also by their demeanor and how they work with others. This gives both MSI and the student the opportunity to decide if they are the right fit for each other before committing to an apprenticeship program.

As Simmons described, most students through their decision making process "don't look at it [apprenticeship] like it as Plan B. They look at it like this is free, I'm getting paid from day one, I'm guaranteed a job, I'm going to make 75k in 8 years, and it's a home run with benefits. They look at it like they've hit the jackpot."

MSI has five apprenticeship programs registered with the state of North Carolina: welder, CNC machinist, tool and dye, quality technician, and maintenance technician.

In their first year the consortium sponsored fourteen apprentices, and eight of them were hired by MSI.

Their most recent class has 14 apprentices. The apprenticeship is time-based involving 6,400 hours of on the job training and 1,600 hours of classroom instruction, and typically lasts 3-4 years depending if the apprentice is recruited as a junior or senior in high school.

The apprentices enjoy learning from the more experienced workers. Zach, an apprentice at MSI, appreciates that “Everyone is willing to show and teach you what they know. I haven’t met anyone here that hasn’t been willing to (mentor).” The apprentices learn at a rapid rate and are productive even in their first year of the

apprenticeship program.

MSI views their apprenticeship program as a low-risk, high-reward investment in their workforce. The upside is their very own recruiting pipeline and a decrease in turnover. Statistically, 89% of apprentices in advanced manufacturing stay at least 3 years after. Simmons explained why apprentices remain loyal. It is mostly because they realize MSI has invested in their future by providing a debt free career pathway to the middle class.

The consortium has taken advantage of the tuition waiver granted for hiring youth apprentices. Even if the tuition waiver is taken away, MSI has committed themselves to the future of their apprentices and would pay their education regardless. Eric, a production manager and Apprenticeship mentor, shared what he thinks the future of apprenticeship will look like “I see it being huge. I see it growing and growing every year. I see a bright future for it (apprenticeship) and an even brighter future for them (apprentices).”



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