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TECHNICIAN SHORTAGE SHOWDOWN: TAKING THE BULL BY THE LONGHORNS

By Loretta Hall

How a group of Texas equipment distributors got an AEDF standards-based technician training program started in their high school system

"I don't go away, and I don't give up."

That's what Glenn Williamson, president of Caprock Vermeer Equipment Inc., told people at all levels of the Lubbock, Texas, public school system. His tenacity, coupled with thorough preparation and a roundup of partners, got a heavy equipment technician training program added to the high school curriculum in less than 18 months.

A series of CED magazine articles had started Williamson thinking about the national shortage of repair technicians, and he could see the problem rearing its head at home in Lubbock. It looked like a challenge worthy of his attention, so he pulled on his boots and stepped into the mud.

First, he contacted AEDF for information on its performance standards and the Equipment & Technology Institute at Chicago's Gage Park High School. For several months, he corresponded and talked by phone with Mike McGinty, AEDF's acting executive director, exchanging ideas and discussing strategies.

"Anyone that's going to try getting this same type of program into their schools needs to draw on AEDF's resources," Williamson advises. Even with all the guidance and support, he figures he's spent an average of 8-10 hours a week on this effort for the past year and a half; he's committed to another three or four years of "keeping the fire lit" under the program before he grooms a successor to take over the role.

GETTING A HANDLE ON THE PROBLEM

In his own community, Williamson began by visiting the local two-year college to see why its program was not meeting the area's needs for qualified technicians. What he found was not so much a problem with the program but with the quality of the students who enrolled in it.

"They had students coming in that really didn't know what they wanted to be," Williamson says. This lack of focus resulted in dropout rates as high as 50 percent in some classes.

The way to solve this problem, Williamson decided, was to shift his attention to the high schools. With access to career information and training at that level, high school graduates would have a sense of direction and a reasonable skill level before they entered post-secondary institutions or industry apprenticeships.

Williamson began looking at this problem in February 1997. Coincidentally, the Lubbock Independent School District (LISD) had opened a new Advanced Technology Center (ATC) in the fall of 1996. Located in a 60,000-square-foot building formerly occupied by a discount store and supermarket, the center was created to meet the educational needs of Lubbock's businesses.

Supported by the LISD, federal and state funds, the local community college, the Chamber of Commerce and an economic development group called "Market Lubbock," as well as several private donors, the ATC pulled together into one location a variety of career-path courses. Students from the city's four high schools are transported to the center for specialized classes in such areas as automotive technology, construction trades, metal and machine shop and several computer operation and repair courses.

"I knew this facility was there and that we could probably get space if we acted before it filled up," Williamson says. "My next step was to gather some industry support."

He started by contacting other heavy equipment dealers-to broaden his base of support, he later recruited from other industries with similar needs, like transport trailer companies, material-handling firms and agricultural businesses. All of the people he spoke to recognized the technician shortage problem but had no ideas or plans for solving it. But with someone like Williamson willing to lead the effort, they were eager to join the stampede. This turned out to be a critical factor in getting a program started in the school system.

ONE SPEAKING FOR MANY

Deciding to start by approaching the highest administrative levels of the public school system, Williamson sought an appointment with Dr. Wayne Havens, LISD's assistant superintendent of secondary operations. "It took me several phone calls and several weeks to get that first meeting," Williamson recalls. "Either they're busy, or maybe they wait to see how serious you are."

To make the best use of the 20 minutes he was finally allotted for his first meeting with Havens, Williamson carefully organized his proposal and supporting materials.

"I went to that meeting with two file folders, with the same material in both folders," he explains. "I had reprints of articles from CED and from other magazines, the draft copy of the AEDF standards for the Gage Park program, the names and companies of my support group, some preliminary descriptions of what we needed in lab equipment, some of the problems that I could see with the post-secondary schools-everything in a written, orderly form."

At the end of the meeting, Williamson left one of the folders with Havens so he could study it and absorb the details.

"If four or five people had come to us individually [about the need for trained technicians], I'm not sure we would have grasped totally what this could mean to our students," Havens says. "But they came with one person speaking for others in our community and they had one goal in mind. They said, 'This is a program we know can be successful. We're committed to helping, not only with resources but also with employment for the graduates.' When you have a group that puts forth that type of effort and that type of commitment, you don't say 'no.' "

Another strategy that paid off was putting a local face on the technician shortage problem. Rather than speaking in national generalities, Williamson did an informal survey and was able to tell school administrators that Lubbock-area businesses currently had 60-75 job vacancies for heavy equipment technicians.

LEADERS MUST FOLLOW (UP)

Williamson realized that presenting his proposal to Havens was only the first step in convincing the school system to implement the program. Even administrators who are progressive and dedicated to helping the local

business community are busy people, and they are probably bombarded by requests from many constituencies.

"Don't let it go to bed," Williamson counsels. "Don't hand it to the school system and expect them to take the ball and run with it. It'll get put on the shelf."

At his first meeting with Havens, Williamson asked who was in charge of technical programs for the district; then he asked Havens for another meeting that would include this individual. As program approval and implementation progressed, Williamson worked with several additional people, including Lynn Hughes, a career placement counselor at the ATC.

Counselors, he learned, are key to the process.

"To help you recruit students, you've got to recruit the counselors first" Williamson notes. "Otherwise, they're never going to mention our industry to students or have information to guide them."

Hughes agrees. "Counselors, like everybody else, have thought in the past that everybody's going on to a four-year school," she observes. "In Texas now, only 20 percent of our jobs require four-year degrees, and we have about 20 percent of the young people graduating from four-year schools. That leaves 80 percent that need to know that there are other opportunities where they can earn at least as much as they can by going to a four-year school."

Williamson and his support group of equipment-intensive businesses used several strategies for cultivating the LISD guidance counselors. For example, they participated, along with other local business persons, in a panel discussion designed to explain to counselors (elementary through high school level) what job opportunities are available in the community. They provided impressive videos about heavy equipment use and maintenance to the counselors for viewing by teachers and students. Perhaps most important, they invited the counselors to tour some of the members' service shops.

"We'd take about an hour, take them through our business, show them how it operated, what types of people we used and what skills they needed, what our pay scales were-and give them printed copies of all the information," Williamson explains.

Seeing the clean, well-lighted, sophisticated working environments made a powerful impact. "They'd see a technician standing on the side of one of our

machines with a laptop computer that was plugged into the machine," he recalls, "and it just put them in awe."

UP AND RUNNING

In some ways, Williamson realizes he got the program operating in the LISD a little too quickly. "We got the class before we got a [school system] budget for it, so we're having to scramble now to get our lab equipped," he says. "It probably would have been better to have waited a year, but we might not have gotten space, and the school system might not have been any better prepared-this way, they're forced to get prepared because they've got students there."

One person who has been caught up in the rush is Mike Garret, who was hired to teach the courses a short three weeks before classes began in August 1998. A heavy equipment technician with more than 15 years of experience, Garret is also a former Little League baseball coach who loves kids.

"I'm enjoying doing this better than anything I've ever done," he says, even though he's struggling to equip a lab, find text materials and design a curriculum. In order to earn his teaching certificate so he can continue past an initial two-year waiver, he spends 14 hours every Saturday working on required college courses in education and is planning to attend summer school.

For the program's first year, Garret teaches three sections of the introductory heavy equipment technology course. Even though the course was added during the summer, after students had already registered for fall classes, 20 sophomores and juniors changed their schedules to enroll in the new offering. A second-year class will be added next fall to cover the core areas of diesel engines and fuel systems, electronics, hydraulics, power trains and safety and administration in greater depth.

"We feel like we need to have about 100 kids in the heavy equipment technician program," Havens reports, "and we envision having that many by next year."

Also relatively new to the project is Larry McHaney, who recently replaced the former director of instructional technology at the ATC. McHaney took that position after the heavy equipment technology program had been approved, but he is heavily involved in its implementation.

"The toughest challenges are physical space for the large equipment and the expense of the equipment," McHaney comments.

He is quick to praise the generosity of the support businesses in donating equipment, machinery and tools. "The community involvement in the program has been tremendous." He says such involvement as well as the documented need in the local community for skilled technicians are two of the most important differences between the heavy equipment program and others currently being offered at the ATC. But he can also see some opportunities for more help from the industry.

"Another thing we need right now is support from not just the dealers but the manufacturers of the equipment," McHaney says. He calls upon manufacturers to share the trainers and curricula they have developed for in-house training programs-he says these could be very helpful in figuring out the details of the program Lubbock is trying to develop.

Finally, McHaney cites the important need for the establishment of standards not only for training but for a national certification exam. He believes that a graduate of the program should have the opportunity to prove his qualifications by passing such a standardized exam that is recognized industrywide.

"The automotive industry has it with ASE [the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence], a lot of industries have it," McHaney says, "and heavy equipment really needs those standards so that they can develop certifications to give these kids an edge and give employers an important tool for hiring."

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