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Seeking in-demand, stable, good paying career? Some say they've found answer

Today, on the front page of FLORIDA TODAY is a story the EDC worked on with reporter Bailey Gallion to bring more attention to the opportunities presented by Brevard County's thriving manufacturing sector and the EDC's Certified Production Technician (CPT) program.

The story features CPT graduates Chris Latham (SMTC) – who spoke at the December EDC board meeting – and Amanda Bisset (SeaDek), who both share how they have benefitted from the program and manufacturing careers. The accompanying video on FLORIDATODAY.com features CPT graduate Tanner Phillipp (Professional Aircraft Accessories) and was shot during a site tour joined by Florida Representative Rene "Coach P" Plasencia, EDC Chair Joe Mayer and EDC Treasurer Bart Gaetjens.

If you have not already, please take the time to read about this growing area of the Space Coast economy, because, as Lynda said in the story, "It's changing people's lives one job at a time."

[Seeking in-demand, stable, good paying career? Some say they've found answer](#)
Bailey Gallion, FLORIDA TODAY

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The landing gear shop at Professional Aircraft Accessories in Titusville employs 180 people at this facility located on Center Lane at Space Coast Regional Airport. TIM SHORT/FLORIDA TODAY

Manufacturing jobs in high local demand

Program helps prepare area students for entry-level jobs in aviation industry

Bailey Gallion
Florida Today
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

When Eau Gallie High School's Aviation Fabrication and Assembly Program started four-and-a-half years ago, 18 students worked out of a locker room and a shipping container. They honed manufacturing skills on a plane tied down in the parking lot.

Today, students learn in a hanger, working on business jets and helicopters under the watchful eye of aviation technology teacher Bill McInnish. According to McInnish, the program started out with more than 100 students this year — and still can't keep up with local demand for skilled manufacturing workers.

"I think right now if I gave (Piper Aircraft) all of my kids that will graduate this year and next year, they would still want more," McInnish said.

Manufacturing workers are in demand locally and McInnish's program is one of several aiming to fill the need. It produces graduates ready for entry-level aviation manufacturing jobs, teaching them skills like safety, use of hand tools and aircraft terminology.

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But despite the demand and the promise of a secure, comparatively high-paying job, there's still a perception hurdle to overcome when it comes to a manufacturing career. That's changing quickly, though.

Parents believe less and less that college is the only way forward for their children, said Matt Susin, Brevard County School Board Vice Chairman.

"That perspective is diminished when parents see their neighbors' kids coming back from college and living on their couches," Susin said.

McInnish and others involved in training programs for young people say entering manufacturing is a way to begin earning without being saddled with student debt. For older adults, manufacturing can be a way to switch to a stable career with benefits.

According to the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast, 23% of the 20,346 jobs created in Brevard County from 2015-2018 were in manufacturing. Demand for manufacturing workers in Brevard is growing fast, especially as the workforce ages. According to an EDC survey, more than 60% of manufacturing workers will retire in the next 10 years, EDC spokesman Brian Baluta said.

EDC CEO and President Lynda Weatherman said the United States lost a generation of people going into manufacturing and the EDC wants to set that right with its CPT certification. She said that with the EDC's "See Manufacturing Through New Eyes" campaign she's fighting the perception that manufacturing jobs are repetitive, dirty and lower class.

"I'd like to say, and it sounds kind of melodramatic, but I truly believe in this: It's changing people's lives one job at a time. There's nothing more noble than a good job," Weatherman said.

The EDC runs a ten-week, 80-hour course through Eastern Florida State College that allows participants to earn a Certified Production Technician (CPT) certification, tour local manufacturing facilities and receive coaching to better their chances of landing a job.

The CPT certificate is a qualification that makes graduates stand out to employers, Baluta said, and the course can count toward college credit. In September the program had an 86% job placement rate, according to an EDC press release.

Lori Robinson, Manufacturing Business Liaison at CareerSource Brevard, said her organization refers job seekers every day to programs like the EDC's CPT program. The CPT program and Eau Gallie's program are just two of many; for example, local apprenticeship programs serve as a bridge into machining and other trade jobs.

Brevard Public Schools provides vocational training through its adult and community education program and Junior Achievement of the Space Coast works with the EDC to expose younger students to potential careers in manufacturing with tours of local businesses.

"Manufacturers here in the county are strongly raising their voices about their need for talent," Robinson said.

Eau Gallie's aviation program has met success, winning several grants over the years, McInnish said. It's the only high school program in the nation that's become an approved training provider for the Aerospace/Aircraft Assembly certification exam.

Counting those entering college or the military, the program has a 100% employment rate for its graduates, McInnish said. Four companies are waiting to snatch his students in 2020 — McInnish wouldn't allow them to recruit until January 1 because he wants the students to focus on their schoolwork.

Susin is pushing hard to get more high schoolers interested in manufacturing jobs. He plans to go to each high school in the county to educate people on the benefits of a manufacturing career and bring manufacturing companies in for job fairs.

Though some parents get hung up on sending their kids to college, student loans are a financial burden that don't always bring a return on investment, he said.

"Let's take the example of a traveling welder," Susin said. "Compare that salary to that of a doctor who just got out of med school who has student loan debt and has to pay for medical malpractice insurance. The welder makes significantly more."

Unlike Eau Gallie's program, the CPT program caters to all ages. Program graduate Chris Latham works for SMTC Corporation, an electronics manufacturer, in Melbourne. He runs the machines that affix components to circuit boards for anything from medical instruments to the in-flight screens on the back of airline seats. Before he was hired by SMTC four and a half months ago, Latham had been unemployed for 11 years. He struggled with addiction for most of his life, he said, and has a criminal record for drug-related charges. Though he cleaned up his life, he fell into a deep depression and barely left his house for a few years. His mother showed him an ad for the CPT program and he joined. The program earned him both a certification and soft skills like building a resume and performing well during an interview. He said he never

expected to have a job like the one he has now. "I never did anything horrible, you know, I have no violent charges, anything like that," Latham said. "But I felt that I was going to be looked down on for the rest of my life." This job provides him a comfortable income and great benefits, he said. And most importantly, it's helped him keep clean. Without his job he doesn't know what route his life would have taken. "Probably it was not gonna be good," he said.

Amanda Bisset, a quality assurance supervisor at SeaDek Marine Products in Rockledge, isn't the type of person most people picture when they think of manufacturing. A single mother of two, she began working in customer service at SeaDek – which manufactures non-slip coating for boats and more – four years ago. Her husband left her and she needed a job to support her children while she went to nursing school. Instead she took a job as a quality assurance technician when the position within SeaDek opened up. Now she intends to work in the manufacturing field for the rest of her career. Though people are surprised to see a woman working in manufacturing, she said she often sees women in management and in the training classes she takes. "It is an area where women can grow and thrive and ... be successful and grow careers," Bisset said. "I will be in manufacturing for the rest of my life. There's no, there's no question about that, like, this is what I do." Bisset was promoted to manager after going through the EDC's CPT program and now makes \$57,000 a year. She has no college degree, but is considering going to school for a bachelor's; her company will cover her tuition if she gets top grades.

And when it comes time for her children, now 5 and 8 years old, to pick a career path, she'll support their decisions — but of course she'll want them to consider a manufacturing career. "It's also a good opportunity for kids to kind of have a better life ... saying, 'Oh, my mom works in manufacturing. She's a quality director', hopefully by that point in time," she said, laughing. "And they'll be able to see the positivity in it."

Bailey Gallion is the business and development reporter for FLORIDA TODAY.
Contact Gallion at bgallion@floridatoday.com or 321-242-3786.

SpaceCoastEDC.org • 6525 3rd Street, Suite 304 • Rockledge, FL 32955 • (321) 638.2000

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