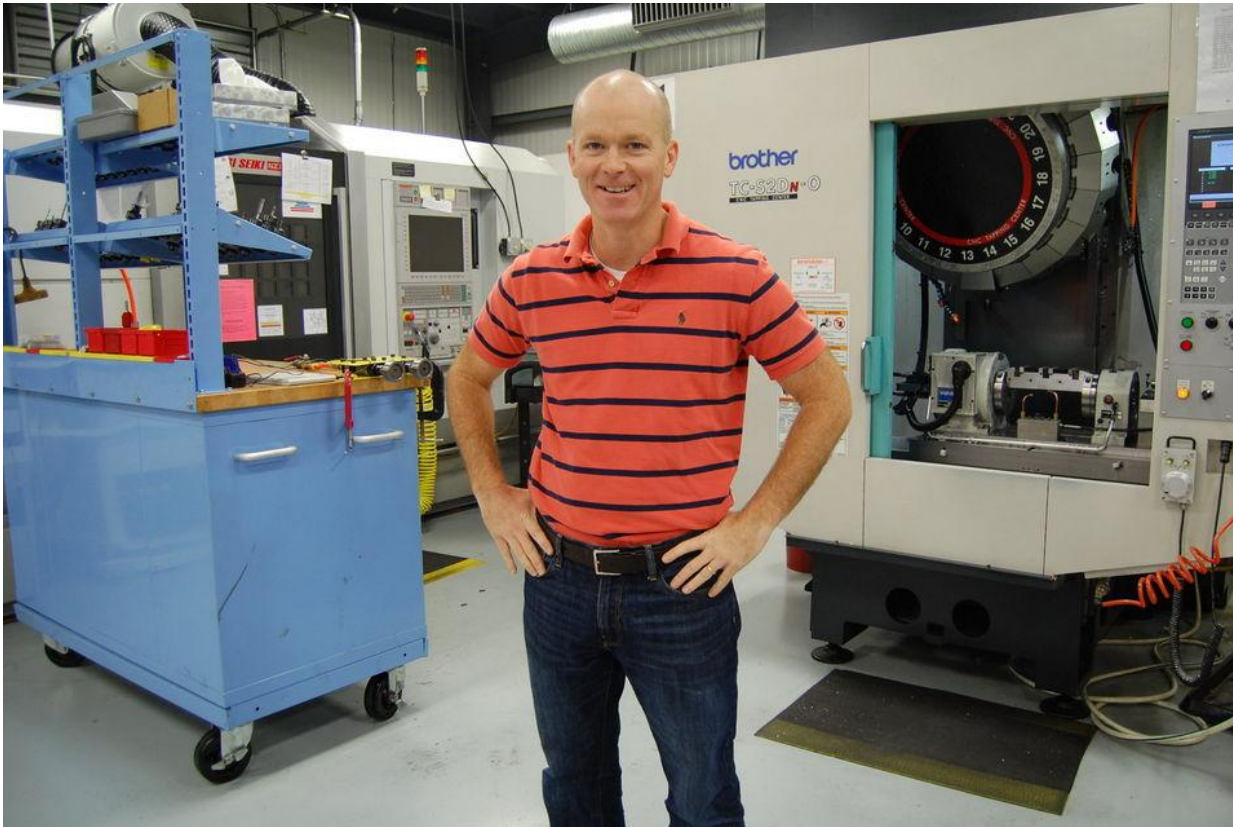


Outlook 2015: VSS in Greenfield helps develop needed workforce

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Steven K. Capshaw, president and owner of VSS Inc. in Greenfield, stands in the 23,000 square-foot manufacturing area of the company.

GREENFIELD –As the president and owner of **VSS Inc.** in Greenfield, Steven K. Capshaw used to face the chronic problem of having jobs he could not fill because of a lack of skilled workers.

The precision machine shop specializes in complex Computer Numerical Control machined components, and it requires up-to-date equipment and skilled employees to compete for contracts for components for use in such industries as aerospace, firearms, oil and gas energy services, military surveillance and radar and power generation.

Today, thanks to modernized machine technology programs in vocational and technical schools, “we see the light at the end of the tunnel (in the search for skilled workers),” Capshaw says.

A consortium of manufacturing companies and other **Franklin County** businesses, led by VSS, recently raised more than \$213,000 in private sector matching funds, paving the way for a \$250,000 equipment grant from the state Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development and a \$239,351 Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund training grant from state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

The company (formerly known as Valley Steel Stamp) was selected 2013 Workforce Solutions Group Workforce Champion Employer of the Year as a result of nominations that cited the company's leadership in securing resources that enabled the community to revamp the machine technology lab at [Franklin County Technical School](#) in Montague, make the lab available in the evening hours for unemployed and underemployed workers and build an adult training curriculum in partnership with [Greenfield Community College](#), the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board and the Franklin Hampshire Career Center.

Workforce Solutions Group is a statewide advocacy coalition of business, labor, community and workforce development groups which advocates for skills training and employment opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals.

In 2010 and 2011, VSS was desperate to find employees, offering increased pay rates and benefits. But workers with the needed skills couldn't be found, and there were no training systems for people in the industry, according to Capshaw.

"There were legions of people underemployed or unemployed with no way to get jobs that paid middle-class wages," Capshaw said. "There was no pathway for people to join our industry."

Technical schools did have machine programs, some so outdated their graduates would not qualify for a job at VSS. But even then, there were only about 160 young persons a year who graduated from area programs.

Since the revamping of the [machine technology program at Franklin County Tech](#), 39 adults have received 250 hours of training; 90 percent have found jobs, five at VSS.

With an increased pool of qualified workers, VSS has increased from \$3 million in annual sales to \$10 million since 2009. "We plan to double that in the next three years," Capshaw said. "The only way that is possible is because of the adult education program."

He expects the number of employees to increase from about 50 to more than 80.

"We're just a microcosm of what is happening in the industry," he said, noting VSS now wins contracts with companies throughout the world because of its skilled labor force.

Dana E. Graves, of Greenfield, works for VSS as a CNC machinist. He had been working as a sheet-metal worker, usually laid off in winter and finding work was "getting spotty" even in summer. So he applied for and was admitted to the adult training program at Franklin County Tech, completing his 250 hours of training in December 2013.

A member of the Greenfield High School Class of 2005, he attended the University of Massachusetts in Lowell for two years in the mechanical engineering program and found the program at the technical high school a "perfect fit" for his skills and interests. Since completing the course, he has had, what he called "job offers up the wazoo."

Working at VSS is a blessing for Graves, now the father of twins who has a steady paycheck and job security. "They (employers) need us as much as we (workers) need them," he said.

VSS prides itself as having the most highly skilled workforce, combined with cutting-edge technologies in machine tools, inspection equipment and process systems.

“Working out of self interest for our company happens to be the same thing as working for the public good,” Capshaw said, referring to the increase in business and the benefits of good manufacturing jobs to families and the community.

Though some manufacturers in Western Massachusetts once employed thousands of people, there are “countless” manufacturing companies now that employ 10 to hundreds of people, Capshaw said.

“Technology used within our industry is moving forward at break-neck speed from robotics to multi-tasking machines,” he continued, and the pool of workers needs to be prepared. Jobs with more skills required fetch higher salaries.

Capshaw said the school machine technology programs must be “constantly” upgraded to keep up with changes in the industry, but he is confident the players who were involved in the revamping of the Franklin County Tech program will “remain together and focused” on making sure a \$30,000 to \$50,000 investment is made in the program each year. “Otherwise, if we wait another 50 years (to make upgrades), they’ll end up replacing all the equipment (at once).”

He said there must be a process of continual improvement of machines, curriculum and teacher training to ensure workers are trained, hired and retained.

VSS was founded in 1971 in Greenfield. With only two employees, it manufactured steel marking tools for the thriving local hand-tool industry. It has evolved with technology and industry trends. There are now more than 50 high-skilled employees who serve more than 500 customers in more than 20 countries worldwide.



[Franklin County machine technology program graduates fourteen](#)