

Manufacturing resurgence Easthampton trade fair showcases regional examples

By AMANDA DRANE@amandadrane October 6, 2016



From left, Laura Picchi, Wayne Ashworth and Barbara Carson stand around the E Ink table during Manufacturing Day, Thursday, at the Eastworks building in Easthampton.

GAZETTE STAFF/ANDREW J. WHITAKER

EASTHAMPTON — The local manufacturing industry may not be what it once was, but manufacturers and organizers at a Manufacturing Day event at Eastworks on Thursday said the field is experiencing a resurgence.

Patricia Crosby, Executive Director of the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board, told the Gazette the event was about getting the word out that the industry has changed but there is plenty of skilled work in the area.

“It’s alive and well,” Crosby said of advanced manufacturing in Western Massachusetts, adding that the industry employs 2,418 people in Hampshire County alone. “There’s good jobs and the jobs are cleaner, better, safer.”

A crowd of about 100 attended the event, and several dignitaries made an appearance — state Reps. Peter Kocot and John Scibak, and Michael Knapik, director of Gov. Charlie Baker’s Western Massachusetts regional office, among them.

Advanced manufacturing has grown so much in recent years, participants agreed, that the challenge now is to train enough workers to fill the employment demand. Funding technical programs and

creating a more seamless transition between local vocational schools and colleges is a priority, officials said.

“Manufacturing is a major economic driver not only in Massachusetts, but in western Massachusetts,” Kocot, D-Northampton, said. “It’s a challenge at this point to provide enough skilled employees.”

“I think the problem in the future is going to be shortage of talent,” agreed Christopher Heon, owner of Easthampton Machine and Tool Inc., and a Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School alum. Heon’s company makes tools for other manufacturers, and the brunt of his sales go to companies within 30 miles of Easthampton.

Gulfstream, a national airline company, opened up shop in Westfield because there are so many precision tooling companies right in the area, Kocot said.

“Now there seems to be a renaissance, and younger people are starting to be interested again,” said Jim Terapane, manager of the machine shop at Millitech, a radar technology company that has locations in South Deerfield and Northampton. “Making things has its own rich rewards — it’s a very important part of our heritage and our future.”

The technology that powers Kindle devices, “electronic paper,” is also made right in South Hadley by E Ink. The company was born out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1997 and later bought by EInk Holdings, a Taiwanese company.

The tech is low-power — it expends no energy to hold an image like an iPhone screen does, but rather draws power only to change the displayed image — and it is readable in sunlight.

In December, a company is rolling out cellphone cases using the technology, essentially turning the case into a secondary screen. Electronic paper has also been used to create wayfinding signs in Boston and billboards in Europe.

“I didn’t even know most of these businesses were around here,” Holyoke Community College student Brittany O’Brien said during the event.

While Thursday’s event wasn’t billed as a job fair, college students milled around asking questions about the companies, and their openings. Northampton defense manufacturer L-3 KEO has about a dozen employees nearing retirement and so greeted them with a list of positions that will soon need filling.

Production Supervisor Todd Frost, who began with the company before it was purchased and its name and location changed, said people in the community sometimes think the business isn’t around anymore when they see Kollmorgen is no longer on King Street.

“We came mainly to get the word out that we’re still here,” he said.

And so are the company’s 280 employees, a point not lost on Scibak.

“That’s what’s important — there are jobs,” Scibak told the crowd, adding that “we’re taking local manufacturing for granted.

“Tell everybody you know products are being produced here in Hampshire County that can change their lives.”

Officials stressed that technology and machinery programs must be bolstered to continue fueling the local manufacturing industry.

“We’ve had some very successful assemblers come out of the Smith Voke program over the past 15 years,” said L-3’s Ron Blajda, manager of manufacturing and test stabilized platforms.

Matt Niedzielski, department head of manufacturing technology, is himself a Smith Voke graduate who worked with Frost for eight years at the company before taking the job at Smith. He said he’s working to revive the summer co-op program between L3 and the high school, and to get more cutting edge technology like three-dimensional printers in the classroom.

“We’re doing everything we can to make the program more attractive, because there’s a world of opportunity for them,” he said.

Industry representatives were impressed by the strong showing, and heartened to see a long-running legacy continue.

“It’s in our blood,” said Omer Gingras, third-generation owner of C& G Machine and Tool in Granby, of manufacturing in Western Massachusetts. “It’s essential that it stays here.”

Amanda Drane can be contacted at adrane@gazettenet.com.



Todd Frost, left, and Ron Blajda, with L-3 KEO in Northampton, talk with people at the Manufacturing Day, Thursday, at the Eastworks building in Easthampton.