

# A solution that sounds right - Dell Tool overcame a shortage of labor due to an untapped source

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It's a gritty job. Oily. Sweaty. Often tedious. A job today's workers don't always want. Dell Tool has run ads, asked workers for referrals, even posted signs by the side of the road. The Perinton company takes chances on lots of people, hiring them for dedication and a willingness to learn, and teaching them the rest. Yet running cutting machines is not a flashy job, and commitment cannot be measured by an interview alone.

About 70 percent of Dell's 36 employees have been there at least two or three years, fairly long in today's machining and tooling industry. But there is almost-constant turnover among the rest. Paul and Gary Jordan, cousins who run the 18-year-old family business, which also includes Rol-Tru Bearings, have gone so far as to recruit workers from their favorite car wash and the local wholesale dub. The company also has looked to schools with vocational programs. But the few that train in tooling and machining do so on the older, and much less expensive, mechanical machines that increasingly are being replaced by computerized models.

In at least one situation - a women's machining program through BOCES - graduates are snapped up by the big companies.

When Gary Jordan heard about a computer-based machining program at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at RIT, he literally rushed right over. Two years later, the Jordan cousins feel they've hit on at least a partial solution for resolving the chronic labor shortage that plagues the industry. Even though all but two of the nine workers hired through NTID have since moved on, the Jordans say it's a valuable pipeline to skilled workers. In addition to its hires, the company draws summer co-ops from the school.

Dell, which makes steel and plastics parts from business machines and woodworking equipment, and sister Rol-Tru, which makes ball bearings, represent just one of the more than 300 machining companies in the Rochester area. But many of them could tell similar tales.

Boomers are starting to retire, and with them the trade skills that used to be a source of pride for a certain generation. A survey done by the Rochester Tooling & Machining Association in 1989 showed that by 2000, 55 percent of its local work force would be retirement age, meaning 50 and older; only 10 percent of the workers at the time were under 30.

Now, even though the pay can be good - starting at around \$7 an hour but more than doubling post apprenticeship - those younger workers are coming from a different place.

"When I was a young man you either went to college or went into a trade," says association director Douglas Seward, noting that many high schools won't acknowledge that the majority of their kids are not going to complete college degrees. "People have forgotten to emphasize the trades. ...Parents want their kids to be more than they were, or at least what they were."

The association has worked with Monroe Community College to establish a computer-based training program, so the industry hopes that will pay off down the road. For now, though, the Jordans are sticking with NTID, which started its computer-based training in 1989, the same year the association survey forecast a retirement surge by 2000.

Now, between six and eight students graduate a year, says program chair Fred Hamil, with many returning to their home states for jobs.

Soon after hiring their first NTID grad, the Jordans also hired someone to teach sign language to supervisors and other interested employees. About eight hearing employees now know some of the language, and the company plans another course this summer. The Jordans also installed a TTY machine and asked the NTID workers to create signs for industry lingo.

Because it's taken those steps, the company now can hire other deaf or hard-of-hearing workers, as it's done through at one community organization.

"To some extent I feel like it gives us an edge over the person down the street that's in the same situation," Paul Jordan says. In an industry where one shop's closing is another's hiring boon, he admits to being a bit nervous about telling others about the NTID program. "We have one more card in our deck that we can go to."

"Working" explores the changing nature and culture of work. It appears weekly in Monday Business. If you have comments or a story to share, call Christina Le Beau at 258-2496. Or write to her at 55 Exchange Blvd., Rochester, NY 14614. Fax is 258-2583. E-mail is: [clebeau@democratandchronicle.com](mailto:clebeau@democratandchronicle.com)