



TLX Technologies kicks off Manufacturing Month

By Chris Bucher - Freeman Staff

Oct. 5, 2016



Design engineer Andrew Biehl explains a new robotic assembly station as he leads a tour of TLX Technologies for high school students on Tuesday.

Charles Auer/Freeman Staff

CITY OF PEWAUKEE — Twenty years ago, Neil Karolek and Derek Dahlgren sat in a basement trying to devise a successful business model for a product which controls the inflation of vehicle air bags.

On Tuesday, Karolek, TLX Technologies' president, and Dahlgren, the company's vice president, were busy educating youth from local schools about the positives of manufacturing and the additional jobs it creates inside its headquarters, at N27W23727 Paul Road.

Karolek, Dahlgren and TLX Technologies' 50 employees kicked off Wisconsin Manufacturing Month by showing about 300 students — 12 busloads — the reality of today's manufacturing companies through tours, informative discussions and hands-on learning.

"We try to show all the different opportunities that you can go on to careers in, in manufacturing," Dahlgren said. "From accounting to marketing to engineering to test labs, that whole range in the office and then into manufacturing and assembly, robotics, maintenance and that whole gamut. Some of the kids who come in aren't going to go get a four-year degree, and some won't go to get a two-year degree; so there's all sorts of options."

TLX Technologies, which moved into its current building in 2012, has evolved into many markets and different applications. It produces custom-made solenoids for automotive, industrial, off-highway and fire-suppression uses and continues to grow. It now has a plant in China, with expansion possible if necessary.

Career options

Introducing students to the industry has been something the company has actively participated in since it opened. In partnership with the Waukesha County Business Alliance's School2Skills program, thousands of students have been given a firsthand view of manufacturing jobs within the area over the years.

Karolek said it's always a pleasure when students come and seek more information about the business at the facility. He added there are many opportunities for those interested to form a career, even early on.

"We always get groups that are really engaged," Karolek said. "We seem to have a lot of shop classes or some math majors a lot more interested in it. Some ask questions like, 'How can I get a job?' "We use summer interns for all kinds of things. Andy (a current employee) was an intern, and started here while going to school at MSOE as part of a scholarship program and we liked what we saw and brought him on.

"It's very possible, and it can be done. It just takes a little effort to do it."

Breaking down common notions

But part of that interest level is based on dispelling the notion that all jobs in the manufacturing field are dirty, sweaty or otherwise undesirable. To help curb that, TLX Technologies added an open-house style format for parents and educators to check out the business after the students do so themselves.

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"A lot of times, kids coming through (the business) might be the ones who already started thinking about it, but they need to go back and talk to their friends and parents about what they saw, and that's one of the things we're doing," Dahlgren said.

"We do it because a kid might come back and say, 'Hey, I saw these opportunities, welding is a great career, Dad!' And the dad will say, 'You're going to go to college and get an accounting degree.' We have to show them there's opportunities that are worth it in manufacturing to help fill the pipeline, or you're going to run out of service jobs at some point.

"If we're going to build up Wisconsin and build the U.S. back up in manufacturing, you have to have people to do it."

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