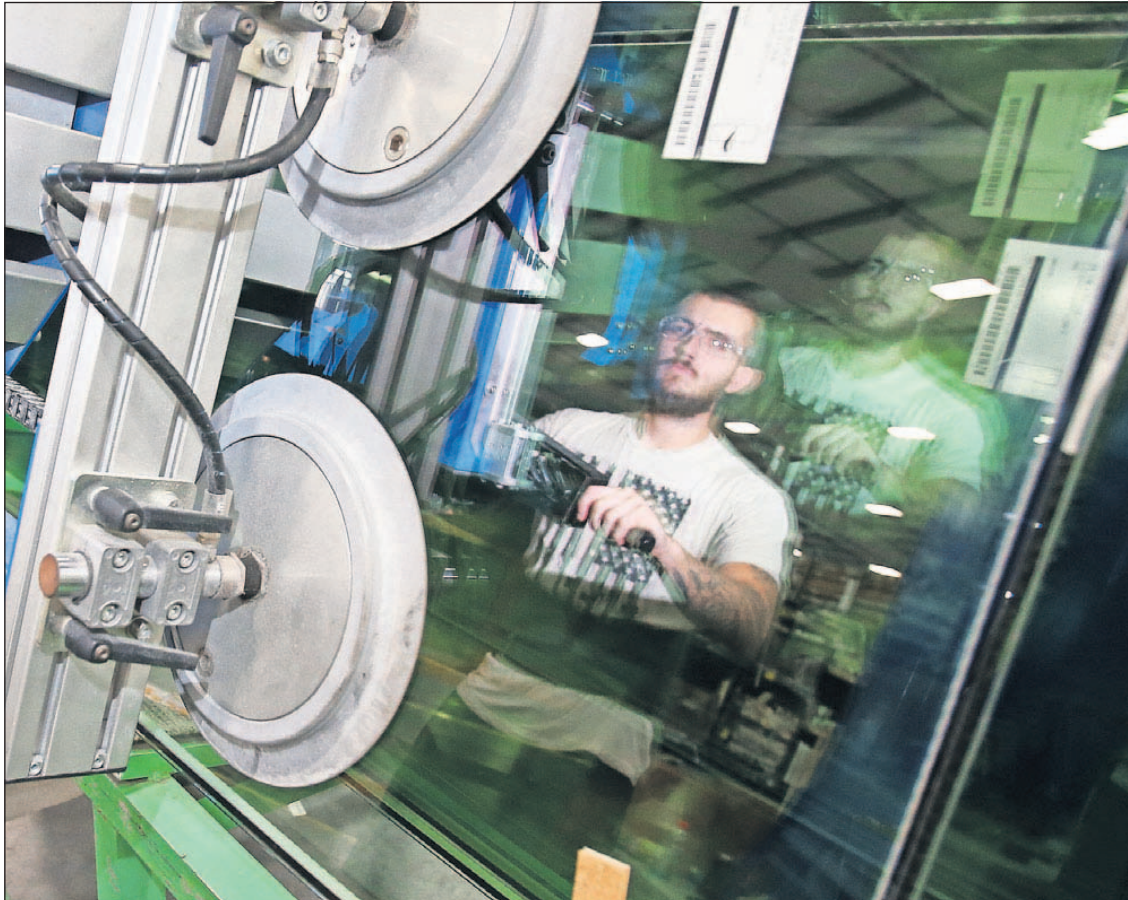


Meeting the need



Joe Lambcke is reflected in a section of high-strength glass as he moves it in place with a large suction cup machine for the production of a window at Custom Window Systems on Southwest 44th Avenue in Ocala. Skilled labor is an integral part of the workforce at Custom, which produces customized and high-strength windows for the Southeastern United States. [BRUCE ACKERMAN/OCALA STAR-BANNER]

Many agencies working to beef up the skilled labor force

By Joe Callahan
Staff writer

Nearly 30 years ago, the New York Times referred to Ocala and Marion County as a “Kmart” economy – a low-wage community whose

lack of skilled jobs led young people to leave for greener pastures.

In 1990, when that story was published, Marion County’s economy was known for restaurant and retail work, not for good paying construction, manufacturing or sales jobs.

That didn’t change for two decades, and this Kmart

economy showed its weakness during the national recession that struck in 2007. Many families lost homes and filed for bankruptcy when retailers and restaurants cut back.

Since that time, there has been a movement among the business, workforce development, economic development,

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education and government sectors to beef up both the skilled labor market and the job market that would employ such workers.

Today, Marion is evolving into a regional hub for distributors and manufacturers. And the challenge has flipped: There's not enough skilled labor to meet demand. Many local companies say they could expand if they could find more skilled labor. As the new economy evolves, that need will escalate.

In Marion County, the number of people working in skilled trades was 13,062, according to the most recent calculations. Of those, half are working in construction. At latest count, there were 600 skilled labor job openings, 28.6 percent of them in commercial trucking. In the past five years, the skilled labor force has grown at twice the rate of all other employment sectors.

There is a movement to meet these workforce needs. Local workforce experts are working with the School District and colleges to fortify local vocational programs, especially in logistics, manufacturing, robotics, trucking, health care and construction.

The view that every child must go to college in order to get a good-paying job in Marion County has waned. Now, educators are telling young people it is OK to enter vocational programs. There are good jobs waiting for people with such skills.

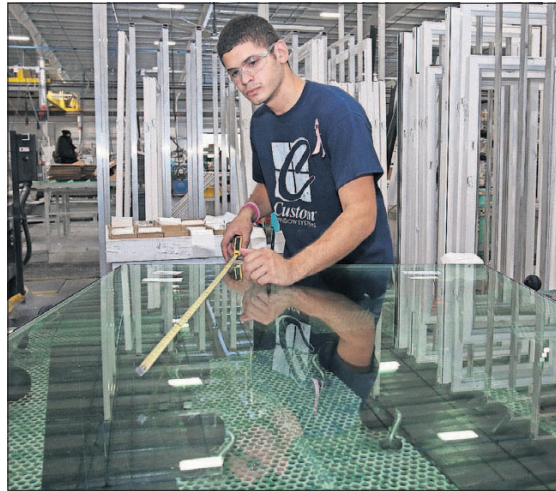
"That (four-year-degree) was a drum we had been beating for years and years," said Laura Byrnes, communications manager for CareerSource CLM (Citrus Levy Marion). "Yes, four-year degrees are fine, but don't think that is the only pathway to success.

"There are number of programs right here in the high schools, where you can graduate and get hired and do very well," she continued. "And there are many opportunities at the local colleges. There are a lot of choices and options and a lot of it is right here in your own backyard."

The business community relays its needs to CareerSource CLM, the School District and colleges. They, in turn, try to produce workers to meet the needs.

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The evolution began in earnest six years ago, when the business community



Kenny Velez measures glass for a window at Custom Window Systems Thursday in Ocala, Fla. Skilled labor is an integral part of the workforce at Custom Window Systems because the company does not use any robots or automation in the production of their high quality windows. [BRUCE ACKERMAN/OCALA STAR-BANNER]

complained that there were no skilled laborers coming out of the School District. Vocational programs were in place, but only as a secondary mission, and they weren't geared toward local business needs.

In 2012, CareerSource commissioned focus groups in manufacturing and health care to study skill gaps. "It wasn't that those (workers) who were available to work didn't have skills, but they didn't have the skills that were needed in these industries because of emerging technologies and advancements," Byrnes said.

Another CareerSource program aimed at changing the minds of parents about skilled labor jobs. Those parents wanted their children to attend four-year universities instead of pursuing "hot and nasty" manufacturing jobs.

Parents didn't know that manufacturing jobs of today pay well and are in climate-controlled and sterile facilities. CareerSource launched a video education program.

Also, CareerSource hired Rob Adamiak, the executive director of the Mid-Florida Regional Manufacturers Association, who died recently.

Adamiak developed numeric CNC coding training. That computer code is used by most manufacturers for making products using computer devices to operate machines, such as extruders.

There was a local shortage of operators and programmers. There was one problem. The cost of one CNC machine was \$500,000, and the materials needed to help students learn the ropes were expensive.

Adamiak purchased the rights to a virtual CNC

machine and issued the computer program to the College of Central Florida, Withlacoochee Technical College and Marion Technical College.

"That was the first wave for us to be responsive to what local business leaders were saying they needed," Byrnes said. "We really need to close the gaps and train up."

Since that first step, all agencies are now working together.

"Not that long ago, everyone was in silos doing their own thing and there was overlap and there was a desperate need to coordinate," Byrnes said. "We are (now) all rowing hard in the same direction to lift the quality of life here and make sure that businesses can succeed and folks that need jobs have good quality jobs for our community."

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At the time CareerSource started responding to current local business needs, the Ocala/Marion County Chamber & Economic Partnership (CEP) embarked on a vigorous recruiting campaign, landing big distributors such as FedEx, Chewy and Auto Zone.

Kevin Sheilley, the CEP's president and CEO, is currently working with the School District and colleges, discussing the needs for beefed up vocational programs.

Then Marion voters approved a 1 mill tax to support education in 2014. The four-year tax was renewed in August. Some of the \$19 million in annual tax revenue can be used for vocational courses.

Mark Vianello, executive director for vocational programs for Marion County Public Schools, helped create Career Choice academies, which target skilled labor

Learn more

Click on this story at ocala.com to find links to previous coverage and source material.

Also of interest

- The White House Council of Economics issued a paper in July noting that economic growth requires a bigger skilled labor force. And to achieve that, "reskilling" of the existing labor force — not just focusing on programs for students — must be a priority.

"Despite hefty investments in formal education for the population aged 3 to 21, public investments in adult education spending taper substantially after age 25, falling near to zero by age 40," the report says.

- Rebuilding the construction workforce will be a longterm effort, according to an economic analysis from BuildZoom, a San Francisco-based data firm.

gaps. The first academy was Logistics to train students in distribution. Many other academies, such as Robotics, have since been established.

CareerSource launched an awareness program with a series of videos to address needs in specific skilled labor areas.

The district also recently launched apprenticeship academies through Marion Technical College, which is also operated by the school system. The college has added electrical and masonry apprenticeships and will soon add carpentry, plumbing and HVAC.

While Marion Technical College is for adults, Marion Technical Institute (MTI) is the school system's vocational high school. The MTI programs will become pre-apprenticeship programs. After graduation, these high school students can continue their training at Marion Technical College.

"Career Choice academies are designed to help meet the workforce needs," Vianello said. "They (students) are not coming out of high school with degrees, but certifications to help meet workforce demands right here in our community."

A year ago, the CEP hired Dean Blinkhorn as director of talent development. He works with CareerSource, the School District and colleges to discuss business needs and student career paths.

"We don't want all of these things to be in silos," Blinkhorn said. "We are starting

some initiatives with CF to make sure it (students' high school experience) is not the end of road."

He used logistics as an example. Students who attend the Lake Weir and West Port high school logistics academies can get a bachelor's of science degree in logistics from the College of Central Florida.

Some programs, such as high school culinary programs, articulate with Marion Technical College. Others may articulate with other colleges.

"We need to make sure we have a direct career path to job market," Blinkhorn said.

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One of the latest public-private movements has been the creation of a local commercial driver's license (CDL) program at Marion Technical College. That program just held its first graduation.

John Brantley, director of recruiting for Cheney Brothers, said his company has adopted a program for new CDL drivers. There is a need for 50,000 CDL drivers nationwide, 172 locally.

Brantley said the local CDL program will be vital for helping replenish the local trucking shortage.

CareerSource's Adamiak lobbied companies to donate tractors for the program. Of the eight graduates, CareerSource paid "full freight for seven," Byrnes said. It cost \$4,500 per student.

The CDL program recently received a \$75,000 donation to help build a driving pad at Booster Stadium. The donation was from the Morgridge Family Foundation and United Way.

CareerSource also has teamed with Marion Technical College to produce a CDL recruiting video and to help graduates find employment.

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Ken Ausley, of Ausley Construction, said the skilled labor shortage is "the biggest issue facing the construction industry today."

Ausley said the construction labor workforce rapidly expanded during the pre-recession housing boom. And then it was cut during the recession, when construction projects all but dried up.

When the economy began to improve a few years ago, construction projects first took off in larger cities like Jacksonville, Tampa and Orlando. Ausley said Gainesville got jump started just ahead of Marion County.

The number of people employed in construction has

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expanded statewide by 10 percent during the past year. In Marion, there has been a 3 percent drop during that time — not because there's no need, but because workers are committed in other cities.

Ausley said it is hard to find quality construction superintendents and subcontractors. He has to pay 20 percent more to entice them away from good-paying jobs with other companies.

"Sometimes I have to be a head-hunter," he said.

Ausley said the shortage of subcontractors is also affecting homeowners who wish to expand their homes. Subcontractors take higher paying commercial jobs

and will bid a very high rate for homeowners because they can make more money in commercial construction.

"Many people are saying that it just don't make financial since to renovate," he said. "Carpenters, plumbers, masons, electricians are all in short supply. It is difficult right now."

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The manufacturing industry is also feeling the squeeze. Imhabibi Akojie, senior human resources manager for Custom Window Systems, said that "with unemployment at an all-time low, the labor pool to choose from is smaller."

"From entry-level general production workers to skilled maintenance technicians, we struggle to find talent with the right mixture of technical skills and knowledge," she said.

The average pay for local manufacturing jobs is \$46,072, or 25 percent more than the average for other private sector jobs, Byrnes said.

Akojie said with an increasing demand for skilled workers, her company has partnered with agencies such as CareerSource and colleges to help "job seekers with comparable skills cross-train from one role to another, strengthening our workforce."

In recent years, CareerSource also has changed its way it recruits. At one time, it held job fairs for all companies and employment sectors at one time. Now it conducts smaller, focused job fairs, such as those focused on health care, CDL and other skilled labor needs.

Recently, two dozen companies sent representatives to a skilled labor job fair that CareerSource hosted at Marion

Technical College. Carl Price, a representative of Kablelink Communications, sat behind a table during that fair in hopes of finding someone with some skills who is willing to learn on the job.

Also there was Warren Davidson, owner of CEM Solutions, an emissions monitoring company based in Citrus County. He said it's harder than ever to find skilled labor.

Representatives from McLane Company, Inc., a trucking company planning to open its doors in Marion County next spring, said an improving economy — which includes a low unemployment rate — makes it more difficult to find workers with CDL licenses and some level of experience.

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