



Alabama's auto worker training programs face pressure as industry demand mounts

Published: Monday, September 03, 2012, 6:30 AM Updated: Monday, September 03, 2012, 7:03 AM



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There are needs across Alabama's auto industry for accelerated worker training programs to meet automakers' needs. Here, employees assemble Mercedes SUVs at the company's Tuscaloosa County factory.

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- Like the fuel that powers a car engine, worker training is vital to the success of Alabama's auto industry. And in an age of increasing output and growing employee rolls in the sector, those workforce development programs are under pressure.

In the past few years, the auto plants of Mercedes-Benz, Honda and Hyundai, along with Toyota's engine factory and other suppliers in the state, **have dramatically increased their output as U.S. auto sales rebound from the deep downturn of 2008 and 2009.**

In fact, Alabama's auto industry is on track to produce a record number of vehicles this year, topping the nearly 750,000 built

during 2011.

But with that growth comes growing pains, and automakers, as well as state agencies charged with work force training, are trying to keep pace.

Automakers say they're pleased with the help the state is giving them, but they do have a hard time finding qualified applicants in certain areas. And some knew there would be gaps in training in the wake of the state's success in economic development, and they began planning long ago to fill them.

Meanwhile, Alabama's two-year college system is trying to accelerate the pace of training programs for jobs that are in particularly high demand, such as industrial maintenance technicians, said Lew Drummond,

executive director of the Alabama Automotive Manufacturers Association and director of workforce development at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa.

"If they can't get qualified employees, that's not a rosy picture for the (automakers) or the suppliers," he said. "I don't even want to think about what would become of the automotive industry if they can't get the qualified workers they need."

Hyundai's Montgomery auto plant is preparing **to kick off a third shift on Tuesday and operate around the clock, five days a week, for the first time in its history.**

While the company has hired some 800-plus workers for the move, there still are openings for industrial maintenance technicians, said Robert Burns, a plant spokesman.

These are the people that fix the robots, conveyor belts and other equipment that make factories in general hum, with salaries that are usually a little higher than regular assembly line workers. For an auto plant, they're often an even tougher find.

"There are not many individuals with the multi-system capabilities that fit an auto plant's needs in electrical, mechanical, robotic and programmable logic controllers," Burns said.

According to the state workforce training agency AIDT, 1,200 to 1,500 industrial maintenance technicians are needed statewide in the auto, aviation, ship-building and other industries, Drummond said.

"We're not able to produce to that level, and it's a problem," he said. "I'm working on a couple of initiatives to see if we can develop a hybrid training program where people could get skills they need but get them in an accelerated manner."

Workforce availability and development are nationwide issues, said Greg Canfield, secretary of the Alabama Department of Commerce.

"We have to be ahead of the demand, as best as we can be, not only in the automotive industry but also in manufacturing in general," he said. "What we've seen is a good bit of partnering between the private sector and the community college system."

The regional, two-year schools are well-positioned to respond to needs of manufacturers in their communities, Canfield said. At the same time, AIDT also provides screening and assessment services during the hiring phases for new and expanding businesses, along with training for employees and students.

For Mercedes-Benz, conversations started years ago about how it could help grow its own talent, said Felyicia Jerald, spokeswoman for the automaker's Tuscaloosa County operations.

"With all the new industry coming in, we knew there were going to be workforce development gaps, and whether it was discussions with the AAMA or other industry groups, we were all focused on the question: What can we do to fill those gaps?" she said.

In a partnership with Shelton State, Mercedes started two training programs, one for automotive technicians and another for mechatronics, the combined study of mechanical and electrical engineering and computer science.

AIDT also supports the programs with equipment and manpower, Jerald said.

At Honda's Talladega County operations, nearly 300 employees have been hired this year as the plant adds a third stamping line and prepares to expand its annual capacity.

Officials are pleased with the caliber of candidates that are available, and the company is still recruiting for positions including engineers, equipment service and production associates, said plant spokesman Ted Pratt.

At Toyota's engine factory in Huntsville, the nearby Alabama Robotics Technology Park in Limestone County is a valuable asset, said Mark Brazeal, general manager of administration at the Toyota plant.

The automaker sends local employees there for training, as well as its employees from Kentucky and West Virginia.

The plant also recently developed a co-op program for skilled labor through Calhoun and Wallace State community colleges, and the company is looking to expand the program to other schools.

"We've found the co-op program is a good way to keep our pipeline filled with potential new hires, especially for maintenance jobs that require additional skills and training," Brazeal said. "It's true that we still face some challenges finding qualified applicants for our maintenance and facilities positions, but this is an industrywide issue and not something unique to Alabama."

Drummond said the two-year system and other agencies are committed to doing what they can turn out qualified workers. Welders also are key, with a demand for 6,000 across the state in different industries.

"So we're ramping up on a lot of fronts," he said.

But there are obstacles to training in some areas. Not all of the colleges have the demand from students that is needed to install the kind of equipment and labs for these training programs.

The average annual wage at Alabama's three auto assembly plants -- Hyundai, Honda and Mercedes-Benz -- tops \$54,400, according to data from the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama.

By contrast, the overall annual average wage in Alabama is \$34,600.

Considering those numbers, plus Alabama's 8.3 percent unemployment rate, leads to an inevitable question: Why is it a challenge to fill any of the state's auto industry jobs?

The key, Drummond said, is having skilled candidates, not just available ones.

"The level of technology in the plants today compared to when they began the industry...there's no comparison," he said.

At Shelton State, students who complete the auto training programs are successful in landing those jobs.

"Unfortunately, some people drop out, they give up and when they do that, there's not much we have to offer because industry will not hire people like that if they can't function at the level they require," he said.□

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