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HCC in the News: Ernest Hooper: Women earning more through training in manufacturing jobs

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Without aid of glasses, contact lenses or Lasik surgery, Hiroko Kato has clearer vision — when it comes to her career.

Kato is working in the local manufacturing industry, a prospect she struggled to reach until she took a special course offered in a partnership between the Helen Gordon Davis Centre for Women and Hillsborough Community College.

Now she knows manufacturing isn't solely rooted in grimy jobs. Now she knows she can make something.

Now she knows women have a place in the industry.

"I didn't see it that way before," said Kato. "But many manufacturers prefer women because they have a greater attention to detail. It's not heavy-duty labor.

"I see things differently now."

Changing the perspective of women is one of the goals of the Manufacturing Alliance, a partnership made up of the Hillsborough County Commission, Hillsborough Community College, Hillsborough County Public Schools and CareerSource.

Manufacturers are seeking workers but often can't find those interested or qualified to handle the positions. That hasn't stopped them from searching for skilled applicants, including women.

"The women we have working here are fantastic," said Tampa Bay Machining Vice President Tammy Coe, who has been in the industry for 35 years. "I would love to see more women."

One of the keys is providing more training opportunities and an emphasis on correcting some misguided perceptions. It's constantly delivering a message to prospective employees — including high school students, men and women — that manufacturing no longer consists of the mundane jobs of past eras.

In short, it's about helping students view it in a new light.

"Manufacturing facilities today feature clean working environments, low noise levels," said HCC vice president of student affairs Ginger Clark. "It's often computers and robotic machines circling the floor. The workers are programming the computers and trouble-shooting the systems.

"They're using a higher skill-set level."

Clark said explaining the modern advancements, helping people understand the financial rewards (jobs typically start at $15 an hour and include ample opportunities to advance) and the sense of purpose that can come from creating tools such as medical devices have spurred interest.

Some progress has been realized in terms of drawing more women into the field. Kato spent her days in customer service until a friend raised her awareness about manufacturing and helped her get into a Certified Production Training program offered at the Centre for Women and taught by an HCC professor.

The instructor, as well as classmates with previous manufacturing experience, helped Kato understand the opportunities. Like others in the certificate program, she landed a job, survived the three-month probation period and is now focusing on expanding her training, perhaps in the field of safety or efficiency.

"I would say it's definitely worth a shot," said Kato, who works at Aqua-Cal.

Clark said additional training programs also have drawn women — a current online offering has drawn 39 students — and the success of the initial training has led the Centre for Women to set up an outreach annex at HCC's Brandon campus.

She said those who have completed training, including a number of single mothers eager to advance, are earning more.

"We still have a lot of work to do," Clark said, "But more and more women are starting to change the dialogue about what manufacturing looks like and manufacturing careers."

It helps that manufacturers have been quick to offer internships to college students and tours to high school students. It's all a part of building a pipeline from training to a livable wage.

"If you're mathematically inclined and take pride in workmanship, manufacturing is a fantastic option," Coe said. "It offers a lot of potential that's often overlooked because it doesn't sound glamorous."

Kato now sees the glamour and she's never viewed her career future with brighter eyes.

"We didn't see manufacturing as a growing industry," Kato said. "But it's actually a powerful industry right here. It's nice to have products that are made locally, made in this nation."

And it's nice to see manufacturing create opportunities for all.

That's all I'm saying.

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