

# TRAINING AND RETAINING

## How to find, train and keep a skilled workforce

BY MARY DEL CIANCIO

The future of the Canadian manufacturing industry depends on a skilled workforce. But attracting, training and retaining young workers, and transferring the knowledge of an older, more skilled workforce, has long been a challenge for manufacturers in Canada.

Adam Smith knows this well. Smith, the operations manager at Barrie Welding and Machine, admits the company struggles to find skilled and experienced labourers. It's for this reason that it puts a great deal of effort into finding qualified individuals for apprenticeship, and on developing the skills it needs in-house with existing employees. This strategy has been successful for the Barrie, Ont.-based company in recent years, enabling it to attract, train and retain a skilled staff of 230, including 12 apprentices.

### Attracting the next generation of workers

Barrie Welding and Machine has been in business for more than 70 years, and in that time has grown to become a leader in the fields of welding, fabrication, machining, press repair and automation. The company attributes much of this success to the top industry professionals it employs.

"We have 250,000 square feet of manufacturing space. We have equipment that's worth millions and millions of dollars. But at the end of the day, without the people with the knowledge and the skills to run it, it's worthless," explains Smith.

This is why the company puts so much effort into finding "good candidates" to join its team. Its strategy includes reaching out to local schools

at the elementary, high school and college levels. For example, it sponsors a grade seven and eight robotics club, which is open to all schools in the area. In addition, it opens its doors to high school students and teachers to educate them on the opportunities in the skilled trades. The company is also heavily involved with the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), a School-to-Work program that enables students in grades 11 and 12 to work towards becoming certified journeypersons in a skilled trade, while completing their high school diplomas at the same time. Representatives from Barrie Welding sit on an advisory committee to assess students in grade 11 who are interested in a career in machining. They interview each student and offer co-op positions through the summer and throughout the last year of high school. The company currently has four students in the shop who are in various stages of this program. The typical co-op term has also been an avenue it has explored to "try out" potential future hires.

At the post-secondary level, the company has a relationship with Georgian College, also based in Barrie. The college has a machine shop and offers various related courses, including machining and mechanical engineering technology. Representatives from Barrie Welding work with the advisory committees for these programs, and provide input into what they feel is important for the students to learn. The company also offers tours year-round to the students and teachers, and sponsors a scholarship for the college's Mechanical Technician – Precision Skills program.

This involvement doesn't just benefit the students, explains Smith. "It's

## 25+ years

Between 40 and 50 staff have been with the machine shop for more than 25 years.



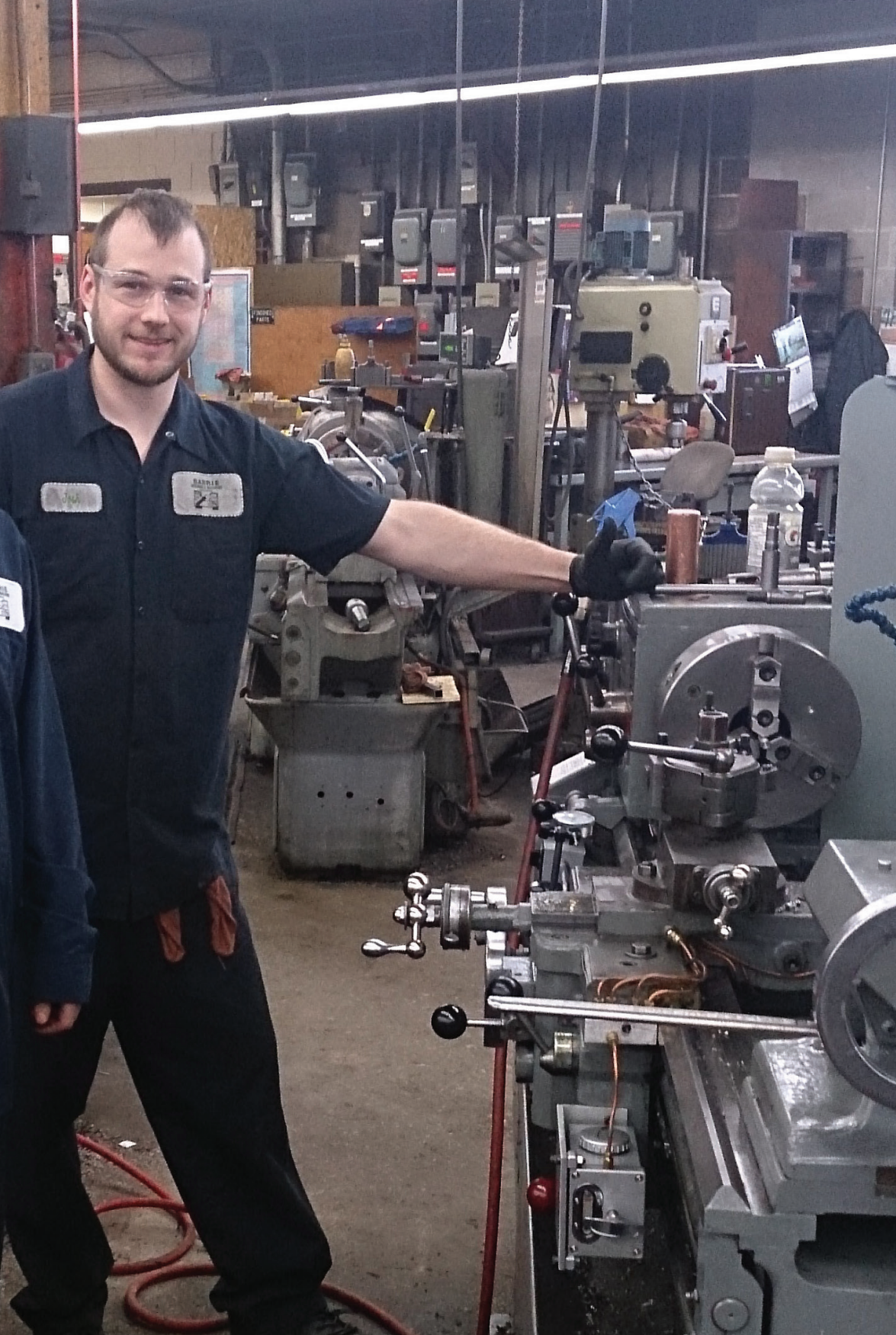
Barrie Welding and Machine boasts a skilled workforce of 230, including 12 apprentices.



a two-way street. It gives us exposure right off the bat to the people who are going to be tomorrow's tradespeople. And we're able to get them interested in Barrie Welding as well."

So far, the company's efforts have been successful.

"It's only been the last three to four years that we've really taken that many steps towards [finding apprentices], but we're starting to reap the benefits already," says Smith. "It's a great way to get the exposure and get to meet the



what's coming in the door tomorrow. You don't know what you're going to be working on. So the more mentors we can spread these people around to, the bigger the base they get," Smith says.

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But when it comes to choosing mentors, Barrie Welding is very selective. Smith explains that the company's first approach was to have the best tradesmen mentor the apprentices. However, the team quickly learned that the best tradesman doesn't always make the best teacher.

"We needed that balance of skill set combined with a personality type that was conducive to teaching — understanding and patient," he explains. "A real key to us was finding those skilled guys that had the personality type to be a teacher as well."

The company is also very particular about the type of work it gives apprentices.

"The lion's share of our apprenticeship training is done in our conventional, manual shop," Smith explains. "We have found in the past that apprentices who have not done that time to learn the basics, when they get in trouble on the CNC equipment, they don't have that basic knowledge to fall back on to problem solve. So we really make it a point to...make sure that there's a firm understanding of that foundation before we progress them into the CNC."

The training doesn't end when the apprenticeship does, though. The company wants to ensure its employees have the skills they need to be successful at their jobs. It will

up-and-comers and possibly influence them towards coming to us."

### ***Training and retaining workers***

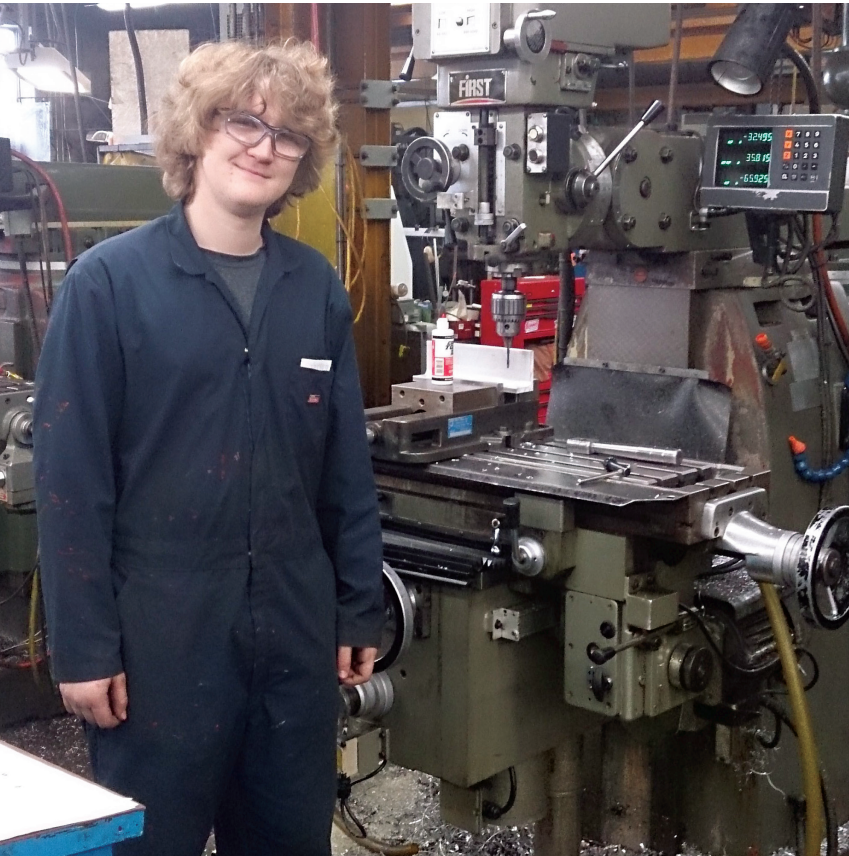
Once the apprentice or young worker is on board, Barrie Welding has strategies in place to ensure they are properly trained and develop the capability to problem solve.

For example, the company has developed a mentorship program. It matches apprentices and young

workers with mentors on the shop floor. Initially they work with their mentors all day, every day, before progressing to a daily check in. In addition, the company doesn't leave an apprentice with any one person for a long period of time. The apprentices are rotated through several different mentors to give them a well-rounded knowledge base.

"The jobbing shop environment requires a really broad knowledge base because literally you don't know

***“We’ve got to remember that what we’re doing here with these students is actually going to keep the companies in business. If we don’t [do this], we’re going to lose to offshore.”***



sometimes bring in experts to talk about the latest in cutting tools or coating technologies, for example. In addition, when employees show an interest in developing their knowledge in a certain area, and there’s a local course available, Barrie Welding will cover those expenses and allow them to take those courses to develop themselves. In the end, says Smith, these new skills benefit the company, too.

Regular training, competitive compensation and fair treatment are just some of the steps the company takes to retain its skilled workforce. These efforts not only help to ensure Barrie

Welding has a skilled workforce, it also helps ensure it has a happy one.

### **A success story**

Clearly its efforts over the years have been successful, as the company has many long-term and highly skilled employees. Between 40 and 50 staff have been with Barrie Welding for 25-plus years, and its longest-serving employee has been with the company for 50 years. These employees possess critical knowledge and skills, and now there is a strategy in place so they can effectively pass it on to the next generation. | **MA**

Mary Del Ciancio is a business writer who has been covering industrial topics for more than 15 years. She is the former editor of *Manufacturing AUTOMATION* magazine.

## AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO TRAINING THE TRADES

Not all manufacturers have the resources to train young workers. But the St. Clair College Skilled Trades Regional Training Centre, formerly the Valiant Training and Development Centre, does.

Over the last eight years, the Windsor, Ont.-based centre has gained notoriety for its Earn While You Learn program, a unique approach that combines work opportunity and training to prepare young people for a job in the skilled trades. The centre joined the college in January of this year with plans to build on the important work that was started by the Valiant TMS Group back in 2008; work that has helped more than 400 students and 36 industry partners to date, and will have helped another 65 students by the end of this year.

Mike Ouellette, who was director of training at the Valiant Training and Development Centre, is now general manager at the St. Clair College Skilled Trades Regional Training Centre. He says he is proud of what the centre has accomplished in the last eight years, but notes there is a lot more to be done to meet the industry’s strong demand for skilled workers.

“I have companies calling me every day [looking] for people. I can’t train them fast enough,” says Ouellette. “I could train 150 students a year and it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy industry’s need right now.”

The Earn While You Learn program is 46-weeks long, and consists of three weeks of in-class training and 43 weeks of training on the shop floor at the centre. During training, the students work

on CAD systems, fully loaded with different types of CAD software. They also train on multiple five-, four- and three-axis machines, learn 3-D solid model machining, and make real parts for the centre’s industry partners. Each student is paid \$12 an hour while being trained. Following the program, the students move onto a full-time, paying job with one of the centre’s industry partners.

This approach is helping the many manufacturers that don’t have the time or resources to train employees.

“That’s why this training centre is really unique, because we’re saving them from having to train somebody. The only problem is we need to grow this,” Ouellette says.

The 36 companies that the centre currently works with are all local, but Ouellette is hoping to add to this list with manufacturers across the province, and invites companies to visit the centre to see how the model works.

“I think a lot of companies are frustrated. They don’t know where to find good people,” Ouellette says. “I think when they come to the training centre and see what we do here, they’re going to want to be involved.”

The work they do is critical to the future of Canada’s manufacturing industry, says Ouellette, and it’s a model that should be duplicated at schools throughout the province.

“We’ve got to remember that what we’re doing here with these students is actually going to keep the companies in business. If we don’t [do this], we’re going to lose to offshore.” | **MA**