

Plastics News

Facing labor shortage, one processor starts its own bus service

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ZEELAND, MICH. — Like much of the manufacturing industry, Primera Plastics Inc. in Zeeland, Mich., has had trouble finding qualified workers to fill gaps in its staff.

“West Michigan is growing so fast, the talent is not keeping up with it,” said President and CEO Noel Cuellar.

The injection molder, producing primarily automotive and furniture parts,

had turned to internal training to build skill level among its staff of about 130, but still had trouble filling both skilled and entry-level positions.

"We have positions open right now, but we're using temp agencies to fill those because we can't find permanent employees," said Steve Berkenpas, Primera's chief financial officer.

Cuellar, who has involved his company in community outreach in the past, thought of a solution that had his staff momentarily confounded.

"We bought a bus," he said.

The "bus" is a part of the company's new program, Primera Pathways, which targets local, unemployed high school graduates who lack reliable transportation. Primera plans to hire three to five per shift for full-time, entry-level positions, and will offer the new employees transportation to and from work for one year in the company's recently purchased 15-passenger shuttle.

"We will pick you up, we will bring you to work and we will train you," Cuellar said.

The company-funded program, which launches this week, is intended to benefit the community while filling Primera's own needs for workers.

"I was asking the question, what happens to those kids when they're done [with high school]? Because not all of them are going to go to college. So there has to be trade school, there has to be a certification program; what is there out there for these kids?" Cuellar said. "...I wasn't getting quite the answers I was looking for."

The new employees will receive on-the-job training as well as guidance in personal development and career skills; PNC Bank has agreed to provide financial intelligence training.

"What we want to try to accomplish is to bring these young individuals into the workforce before their skills that they've received in high school become diminished," Cuellar said. "We want to get them engaged as much as possible so that they can look at a brighter future. Not just for the manufacturers and Primera, but we're also focusing on the individual."

Another West Michigan injection molder, Cascade Engineering Inc. in Grand Rapids, Mich., has experimented with unconventional recruiting programs. Cascade in the mid-1990s created a van-pool to transport recruits — unemployed and homeless individuals on welfare — to and from work. In that case, the company found the transportation privileges were sometimes abused, and the program ended.

In an effort to promote accountability and mitigate obstacles for its program, Primera will require interested individuals to bring a guardian to sign up for the program. Each potential hire must complete an application and local non-profit organizations will provide pre-screening.

If Pathways hires are successful at the company, the intent is for them to stay on as permanent employees after the one-year period is up, said Bambi Hollingsworth, director of operations.

“Depending on whether they want the quality [department], operations, engineering — we have career paths for all of them, for all of our operators,” Hollingsworth said.

Primera also is working with its customers Gentex Corp. and Herman Miller Inc. to use the program for their own hires.

“It’s about giving those kids an option, and opening their eyes to the skilled trades,” Cuellar said. “Somebody still has to grease the wheel, and there’s a shortage of people that do that, and you can make darn good money at it.”

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