

ALLIANCE FOR WORKING TOGETHER:

Attracting the Workforce of Tomorrow

Addressing root causes of the talent shortage is a top priority for Alliance for Working Together (AWT), a nonprofit based in Lake County that includes about 100 manufacturers, support businesses and educators.

“We are working to educate our communities that the common image of manufacturing jobs as dark, dirty and dangerous is outdated,” said Executive Director Alice Cable. “Manufacturing has changed, and there are many exciting career opportunities.”

Toward that goal, AWT’s annual RoboBots competition is a fun, exciting forum for reaching high school students along with a Junior Bots program for middle school students. Student teams spend months designing and building their robots. The teams work with a mentor from a local manufacturing company, which gives them exposure to additional expertise – and today’s manufacturing workplace. For instance, students and parents attend an open house at the manufacturing partner’s site.

The teams’ efforts culminate with “metal mayhem” in late April as the students’ robots battle it out. In 2018’s eighth annual competition, 20 high school teams and 27 middle school teams participated. About 5,000 people attended the competition, held at Lakeland Community College. In addition to naming winners, prizes are also given for documentation, engineering, team presentation, sportsmanship and “coolest bot.”

Offered at no cost to schools, the program builds technical skills such as machining, electronics, engineering and documentation, math and science, marketing and budgeting. Students also learn valuable problem-solving techniques such as SWOT analysis. Equally important, RoboBots fosters soft skills such as teamwork, project management, critical thinking and work ethic.

RoboBots also leads directly to manufacturing careers for some students. Most of the manufacturing mentor companies have hired at least one student through the program. Surveys of participating students indicate they have a favorable perception of manufacturing after participating in the program.

In addition to RoboBots, other key AWT initiatives include:

- **Summer Manufacturing Institute.** This program gives early middle school students a one-week experience that includes fun hands-on projects, guest speakers and tours of several manufacturing facilities. To address the gender gap in STE[A]M fields – women make up less than 25 percent of the workforce in science, manufacturing and engineering – the program includes a girls-only week. “Early exposure to some of the coolest parts of manufacturing may help close that gap,” said Cable.
- **ThinkMFG Career Expo.** AWT and the Lake County Chamber of Commerce have partnered to host an annual “career day” event that connects manufacturers with future workforce candidates as well as teachers, guidance counselors, parents and more. The event is held annually during National Manufacturing Month (October). The 2017 career fair and trade show attracted 600 students, with 37 manufacturers participating.



These diverse initiatives reflect AWT’s commitment to helping students, educators, counselors, parents and others understand what a career path in manufacturing is all about. For more information, visit <http://thinkmfg.com/>

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