Building With an Eye Towards the Future

As their pilot apprenticeship initiative takes off, Philadelphia/Delaware Valley chapter President John Shegda discusses getting to this point and what the future holds.

John Shegda, owner of M&S Grinding and NTMA Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Chapter president, observed what many Chapters across the country see in their regions: despite being heavy with manufacturing, a lack of qualified emerging leaders in the area was causing companies to fall off, in turn hurting the Chapter and shrinking Philadelphia’s precision growth.

“The Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Chapter region and southeastern Pennsylvania as a whole have not communicated very well,” says Shegda. “With different states, different counties, a big city, it breeds a lot of resentment and tends to have people défend to just taking care of their own. The whole region doesn’t generally act together.” After years of talking about it, the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Chapter recently took the much needed steps to bring the surrounding manufactures together with the common goal of piloting an apprenticeship program initiative.

“While other regions around the country have done well with putting apprenticeship programs and initiatives in place, we haven’t done a great job here in Philadelphia of this. After Herb Homeyer was here in November, we kind of looked at putting an initial, small pilot program together for apprenticeships, thinking of maybe ten people in one tech school. When we mentioned we were looking to use an NTMA model, Herb suggested that we talk to Mark Lashinsky in Arizona. They were able to help provide us the program they use, and help us as a starting point.”

Shegda used the informational packet and curriculum guidelines Lashinsky provided as a spring board to approach the Department of Labor. With a few changes to the program to make it applicable to Pennsylvania, Shegda was able to initiate conversations around a regional apprenticeship program effort. “It kind of grew and took its own life on from there. We began regularly speaking to the Department of Labor and the local Workforce Development Boards as well as the community colleges,” says Shegda. “The community colleges work as a community and share resources together; it’s about six or seven schools total all around this region, which is great because there’s this network that already exists from an educational standpoint.”

“Once we started asking the questions, we began to realize that everything we would need – all of the resources, all of the programs – to pull off a fully-regional apprenticeship program, with the NTMA as the central sponsor, was already in place and working. The issue was that these programs and resources just were not connected or had not communicated before with one another. It became our job to make connections and ask people if they mind talking to others, and that was kind of what January conference meeting was about.”

With Dave Tilstone and Ken McCreight in attendance, the meeting was designed to show the manufacturers the feasibility and structure of a regional apprenticeship program. “All manufacturers know that they need training and a good pool of talent – it’s everyone’s complaint across the country, that there aren’t enough good employees to hire. We showed them we could put all our pieces together and successfully train incoming employees. The systems were all there and working; the last piece was them; they had to ante up with a slight monetary, but mostly time commitment, to make this work.”

At the end of the two-hour meeting, Shegda gave his call to action, asking companies to commit. “We needed to see a certain number of these companies committing to this. Out of the 67 attending companies, 45 signed up during the meeting, with another 15 that were unable to attend also committing after.” We were hoping for 30; we figured that would be enough of a majority and a showing for us to want to continue with this and push it forward.”

Prior to using a training center, Shegda and his team must register them as educational members of NTMA to access the NTMA-U curriculum. Currently, two of the four participating community colleges are NTMA members. A board of educators and manufacturers will then decide on the course work and testing points using a combination of NTMA-U curriculum along with the curriculum from the schools. They are also working to finalize the Department of Labor information. The plan is to have a pre-apprenticeship program in place by September to funnel eligible apprentices into the official program.

“We’re working now with the local Workforce Development Board to find potential apprentices who are currently unemployed or under-employed,” Shegda says. “The Board would take that group and send them to community college where they
would go through mechanical testing, drug testing, and be submitted to interviews with manufacturers. The manufacturers then have the chance to give input into whether a candidate would do well in the industry. They boil that initial group down to about 10 to 15 candidates, and these finalists go through the program fully paid by the state. They get pre-apprenticeship training with some shop math, blue print reading and high-level touching NTMA instruction, such as mill work and grinding, as well as some non-NTMA skills like sheet metal and welding. Companies involved with the program will then be able to hire and enter them into the apprenticeship program, likely with some subsidized help from the state.”

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The intention is to get two or three pilot programs up and running across the region this year, with ultimately creating six to eight programs in the next two to three years. All programs will be administered by a third party manager in order to greatly reduce the paperwork for the manufacturer.

The biggest key, Shegda says, is that the employers are involved. Manufacturers have to be willing to interview candidates and offer shop tours. The end result will not only help the region by offering well-paying jobs, but also increase enrollment to community colleges and technical centers and send good workers into local companies.

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Already since the meeting, nonmember companies have inquired about NTMA memberships, something Shegda is hopeful will turn into growth, awareness and sustainability for the already highly active Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Chapter.

“It really shows that these companies see the value that was presented to them and the value of the apprenticeship model that we’re looking to put in place,” Shegda says. “We think that a great side-benefit to the program will be the growth of the chapter. Because we showed a good value of NTMA, we have already had some strong inquiries for membership. NTMA brings a lot to the table, and many companies didn’t realize this – we just had to wake them up to the fact.” With the majority of manufacturers present at the meeting already signed on for the initiative, Shegda believes others will quickly come on board once the pilot programs are in place.

As for apprentice candidates, Shegda

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doesn’t foresee a shortage any time soon. “At M&S Grinding, the average employee age is 31, so we’re a young crew. In a little over the last year, we’ve hired four people out of these pre-apprenticeship programs. Out of our 35 person crew, eight of our employees want to be involved in this initiative so they can get higher learning, evolve their skills, and ultimately earn certifications towards college credit – not only through the NTMA-U and their relationship with the University of Akron, but locally for associates degrees and ultimately a bachelors degree in engineering technology from either Temple University or Drexel University. It’s offering a lot of opportunity pathways for development that will keep engagement in the workers, so our employees, and hopefully new people entering the program, are really excited for it.”

The future

According the Shegda, this initiative is only step one. “We’re hoping to have 10 to 20 apprentices fully in the program by fall. What we want to do is build it with an eye towards the future,” he says. “Once we build the structure and have the system running, all it would take is a curriculum change to have an apprenticeship program ready-made for whatever’s next. We’re trying to build this with the best interest of the region in mind to offer the best roads for all of manufacturing. We have great resources here and feel that there’s a real high chance of success to getting this up and operating.”

And that’s a sentiment Dave Tilstone shares, as well, saying, “I have not visited any region in the U.S. that has such readily available and qualified resources for an apprenticeship program. The energy and commitment from attendees at the meeting was quite remarkable and should provide a strong platform to get the program started. I was especially pleased with the large turn out of manufacturers with a large majority committing to participate. NTMA is proud to be part of this effort.”