
 OPINION

BUILDING LANE COUNTY'S WORK FORCE

RV rivals cooperate to grow workers

By MIKE WARNER

As a company in the fastest growing manufacturing industry in Lane County, Marathon Coach is increasingly challenged to find skilled employees.

In a rapidly changing environment that includes unprecedented demographic shifts and pressure to achieve new levels of efficiency and productivity, our continued success requires new and creative thinking. This includes the realization that companies must both cooperate and compete in addressing common issues such as skills shortages. The "co-opetition" model brings a group of companies together to simultaneously cooperate and compete as they create maximum value. These groups often include public partners delivering education, work force and economic development services.

That's the genesis of the RV Consortium created by the local recreational vehicle industry. Companies in the consortium include Marathon Coach, Country Coach and Monaco Coach. The Lane Workforce Partnership convenes the group and provides assistance on work force issues. Lane Community College offers training and curriculum development. The Lane Metro Partnership and the Oregon Economic and Community Development Department assist with industry economic development issues.

All local recreational vehicle companies have similar work force concerns. Our industry has grown so rapidly that the training infrastructure has not kept pace. We struggle to find qualified workers. We also face the public's misconceptions of manufacturing work as being dirty, repetitive and low-tech.

We know we must reach out to young people and others who will make up our future work force. Solving these challenges requires strength in numbers.

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We began meeting as a group in late 2005 and have made significant inroads in addressing our common issues. We began by identifying work force training needs and gaps and communicating them to our education and work force representatives. We created a logo and slogan for the consortium. We brought specialized industry trainers to the area to work with our employees, and together we created an industry-specific curriculum.

We also were able to leverage lower costs due to buying in volume. We all discovered a keen passion in working with youth and sharing the excitement of career opportunities in our industry.

Building our pipeline of workers will take a long-term view and sustained effort. We know that time and attention invested now will pay off in future years. Our industry outreach campaign includes a presence at high school and community career fairs under a shared "RV Consortium" banner. We've produced two career awareness DVDs to inform the public about career pathways in the industry, conducted regular tours of our plants and spoken frequently in the schools. The consortium has also received a grant to develop an internship program that will provide work experience opportunities for students interested in careers in the industry.

Could we have accomplished all of this as individual companies? Some of it, yes — but the benefit of a shared industry voice is undeniable. As a group, we have been able to garner more attention and support than our companies had been able to achieve individually. Our unique public-private partnership has received recognition from Sen. Ron Wyden, Gov. Ted Kulongoski, the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce, the school systems and the media.

Would we as a company have considered this partnership five years ago? Frankly, no. Yet the reality of our new economy requires unconventional alliances and out-of-the-box thinking. Companies should challenge themselves to develop their business by initiating, leveraging and redefining relationships. This 21st century model of "co-opetition" will be key to adapting to 21st century work force challenges.

Let me quote two of our partners about the value of the RV Consortium:

Carol Taylor Clay, employee development manager for Country Coach: "Having doubled our employment in recent years, the synergies realized through the consortium are very timely for Country Coach. Our work force is our most important asset and continual development is key to everyone's success — our employees and the company as a whole."

Deanna Ota, human resources director for Monaco Coach: "The RV Consortium and related training grant now allow us to work together as an industry to focus on the development of these critical skills. The program also makes Oregon more attractive as a location for our industry to do business."

Mike Warner is director of human resources for Marathon Coach. This is the sixth in a series of biweekly columns about developing Lane County's work force.