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Higher education key to filling job skills gap

By Jerry Howard

Think of it as the great divide. On one side, you have people desperately in need of work. On the other, there are employers who need workers. Not just any workers, but qualified employees who bring advanced skills to the table. This gap between the skills that exist and the skills that are needed has been cited by many groups as a major threat to progress in this country.

The problem may become even more serious. Signs point to better days ahead for U.S. manufacturing. According to a study prepared for the National Association of Manufacturers, jobs that went to foreign countries years ago may return as the cost advantages of some major foreign competitors including China are narrowing. The jobs that are coming back aren't the same jobs that left. These positions now require a higher level of skill, and there aren't enough people who have the knowledge to fill this anticipated influx.

Fortunately, in the Upstate, we are in better shape than most areas of the state and many parts of the nation. South Carolina's unemployment rate at 9.5 percent is still higher than the national average of 8.5 percent. But Greenville's unemployment

rate, at 7.7 percent, is among the lowest in the state, and we're seeing healthy job growth with seven new companies and 14 expansions announced in 2011 by the Greenville Area Development Corporation, the county's economic development arm, and two more since the first of this year.

Existing companies are strong, too. BMW has announced a \$900 million investment, adding 300 jobs, and opportunities for high-wage manufacturing jobs are available here with Michelin, Fluor and General Electric leading the way.

What's contributing to those favorable statistics? Many factors are involved including a strong relationship between education and job creation. In the Upstate, this relationship starts early on.

School today is a very different place than what many of us remember. Instead of simply listening to lectures, students in Greenville County Schools are expected to demonstrate what they've learned through hands-on projects. Many of these projects

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are accomplished in groups, where teamwork and communications skills are critical. These hands-on learning opportunities prepare young people for the world of work.

Once students move from K-12 to the next level, the strong tie between education and job creation continues. At Greenville Technical College, that tie is the reason the college was founded and the reason it's growing strong 50 years later. A quote from the October 18, 1966 issue of *The Greenville News* read, "Until Greenville TEC opened here, the request for technologists and skilled workers was impossible to answer. As a result, industry — and business — was forced into drawing on the pool of trained workers from others states..."

Much has changed over the last five decades, but the need for trained workers hasn't. Greenville Tech is an important resource as we recruit business to the state. Working with companies before they arrive, Greenville Tech can make sure that a ready pool of qualified people is waiting. Once the company is here, Greenville Tech can support growth by layering on skills that increase an organization's competitiveness.

Challenges remain. Recently, Greenville Tech administrators and board members had discussions with CEOs of several major manufacturers in the area including Michelin, BMW, Bosch, and ZF Lemforder about the problem of finding enough skilled labor. Working together, employers

and educators plan to address needs by identifying employees who can benefit from customized, short-term training to address skill shortages and by addressing the misperceptions about manufacturing that turns some young people away from very promising careers.

And while the two-year college can meet many skills requirements, additional skills gained at the four-year level can provide employers with job candidates who can advance into senior roles and eventually fill management positions. One path for reaching the four-year level is to start at Greenville Tech and enter the workplace, while completing a bachelor's degree through the Greenville Tech/USC Upstate partnership called Upstate Direct Connect. Other options nearby include Furman University and Clemson University.

How can we ensure continued progress in jobs creation? The skills gap is a very real problem, and unless it narrows, opportunities can easily fall through a very large crack. The Upstate is fortunate to be

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ahead of many parts of the country in developing solutions to this dilemma. By strengthening the partnerships between economic development professionals, employers, and educators, we can continue to lead other areas in innovation and competitiveness.

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