

Experience the Trades Expo draws record high attendance

Students explore potential careers in manufacturing and construction

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Faith Rae/Freeman Staff

Sam Hoffman, associate talent manager at Milwaukee Tool, shows a student how to use a specific tool. Katherine Rose, associate recruiter at Milwaukee Tool, observes the interaction on the right.

WAUKESHA — A record turnout of 1,500 middle and high school students in Waukesha County attended the inaugural Experience the Trades Expo Tuesday, getting hands-on experience through exhibits that highlighted careers in construction and manufacturing.

More than 40 skilled trade companies attended the event at the Waukesha County Expo — Forum Building, 1000 Northview Road, to provide interactive activities for the students including virtual welding, using an imitation grinder; buffing the hood of a car; building a secure structure, surveying with a robotic station and more.

It's all about excitement, engagement and awareness, according to Senior Vice President for Public Policy of the Waukesha County Business Alliance Amanda Payne.

"Workforce is the number one challenge for most of our businesses here in Waukesha County," said Payne. "And that's especially true in manufacturing and construction industries."

Manufacturing is starting to come back, according to President and CEO of Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC) Richard Barnhouse. As times have changed over the past 40 years, the industry has more become advanced and needs workers with highly technical skills.

"The ultimate key though, is that students in high school right now are entering into a world that's about to change radically with robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning," said Barnhouse. "We like to partner with WCBA to get the message out to students who are coming through high school that they've got this unbelievable fabric of opportunities."

'The earlier the better'

In Waukesha County, dual enrollment is a successful program that is growing, according to Payne. Students have the opportunity to enroll in their local high schools as well as WCTC.

"I think the earlier the better," said Barnhouse, adding that in some cases, by the time a student hits eighth grade, they are already being shepherded down one path. "I think it's important for students in middle school to have their eyes opened up."

The WCBA hopes to expose students to a career path that they hadn't considered before as part of their strategy to build on a strong talent pipeline for industries in Waukesha County.

By allowing students to engage with the business community, Payne and the WCBA hope students will gain awareness of the local companies that surround them and are actively providing job opportunities for a growing industry.

Hands on

The event ran from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., giving students plenty of time to try all the activities. Businesses with exhibits provided a number of hands-on experiences, training and guidance, allowing the students to take charge and explore the skill on their own.

Brent Kostrzewa with the Walbec Group, an umbrella group of smaller companies that produce high-quality construction materials, felt the event was primarily about outreach and sparking interest in the youth.

The Walbec Group exhibit welcomed students to sit on top of a roller, a construction machine. Helping students up and watching them smile

with joy is part of the experience.

"It just gets them thinking," said Kostrzewa. "Even just sitting on equipment like this, maybe they'll remember that, or they'll see this on the road and equate that to what we do."

Cameron Walsh, a seventh-grade student in Hartland, sat on top of the roller and learned how to terminate a jack at another station. Walsh told The Freeman that his favorite part was the hands-on element.

"Instead of having someone talking, it's fun to actually do it," said Walsh, adding that he likes to build stuff around the house and potentially sees himself taking up a career like this one day.

"It's an industry that we absolutely need students to be a part of," said Katherine Rose, associate recruiter at Milwaukee Tool.

Sam Hoffman, associate talent manager at Milwaukee Tool, said he saw a lot of smiles throughout the day. "It's just one of those things where they see their parents use it, then they try it for the first time and it's just kind of a thrill," said Hoffman.

Students Olyvia Hall and Haylee Smukowski said their favorite part was hammering a nail into a block of wood.

"It was helpful. I learned how to hammer a nail faster," said Smukowski, adding that even though she wants to go into marine biology, she felt the skill will help her in the future when it comes to building and repairing things on her own.

"The earlier you get a student with multiple points of view towards what their career can be, the better off they are and the better off we are in Waukesha County," said Barnhouse.