

## Manufacturing sector growing in Durham

By Monica Chen: **The Herald-Sun**

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Durham and the Triangle are often known for strong life sciences and biotechnology industries, fueled by research from three major universities in the area.

But manufacturing?

In fact, there are a number of manufacturing companies in the Triangle. The sector also grew by more than 700 workers in the Durham metropolitan area in 2007, the third-highest by job growth.

The problem is that there aren't enough skilled workers to go around.

"Mechanics, electricians are difficult to find. They can name their price, hours of work. They're in high demand," said Will Collins, vice president of human resources and administration for AW North Carolina Inc. in Durham.

Collins and representatives from five other companies met with Durham school officials recently at a forum hosted by the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce. The group shared information and ideas on where work force shortages are and how to get more local students on track in manufacturing careers.

AW, which opened in 2001 and has grown to 1,250 full-time workers, makes automatic transmissions and components. The company has about 60 people on its machinery maintenance team and still needs eight more.

The positions pay \$18 to \$20 an hour, Collins said, but the company is still having difficulty with hiring.

Part of the problem is that it's not just manufacturing companies that need such workers, Collins said. Computer companies, biotechnology firms and even hotels and office buildings all have a need for mechanics and electricians.

An outfit like AW also sees competition from companies like Merck, which opened a vaccine plant in Treyburn Corporate Park recently, and Eisai Inc., a production facility in Research Triangle Park owned by a Japanese pharmaceutical company.

Merck plans to hire 90 more manufacturing workers in the next three or so years, a company representative confirmed.

At the root of the shortage of workers, company officials are saying, is the problem of image.

While the skills involved in manufacturing jobs today run the gamut from basic electrical work to a process technician with a biotech company, people outside the industry still think of it differently.

"I've heard from teachers and students that it's hard work, or in some cases, that it's dirty and there's no advancement," said Bob Gantt, director of career-technical education with Durham Public Schools.

Heavy blows to traditional stalwarts like tobacco and textiles in North Carolina, as well as a national trend of companies taking jobs abroad for cheap labor also have tarnished manufacturing work's image.

Durham school officials are planning to look into expanding current manufacturing programs to meet local companies' needs.

At Durham Technical Community College, Program Director of Continuing Education Ken Berger said the school had often heard of shortages in industrial maintenance and biopharmaceutical manufacturing workers.

The college offers a two-year industrial systems technology program and a certificate for continuing education as an industrial maintenance technician. The latter program is new and will see its first graduates this spring.

The school also has its BioWorks program, an introductory course for process technicians that trains students in FDA regulations, using and converting to the metric system and basic separation methods in pharmaceutical manufacturing.

The program graduated 90 students in 2007.

Durham Public Schools is also hoping to complete The Holton Center by fall 2009, which will combine a Duke Wellness Center with city programs and career training for students.

Hillside and Jordan high schools currently have technology training programs, and Riverside and Southern high schools have pre-engineering courses.

"We'd like to maintain as much as possible a good, strong working relationship with businesses," Gantt said.

"I think there are some industries where people just pigeonhole positions or certain jobs," he said. "These companies have jobs that are upwardly mobile."