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News

Tech teacher taking on manufacturing externship

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By SCOTT WHIPPLE
Staff writer

BERLIN — Tom Zelek says his externship is perfect timing.

"We just spent $12,000 to retrofit our Bridgeport [machine] at Glastonbury High School," he says. "It's a perfect time for me to spend some time on the machine."

Zelek, 51, is a Berlin resident and Central Connecticut State University graduate. In addition to being an adjunct professor at CCSU, he is also a technology and engineering teacher at Glastonbury High School. Zelek, who has been teaching for nearly 30 years, will work from July 6 to 31 at Habco in Glastonbury. His externship will focus on computer numerically controlled machine tools that have revolutionized the design process.

A Bridgeport machine is one of a family of machines that do manual milling, surface grinding, and computer metal cutting. The machines make tools used to cut and shape metal parts for products used in various industries.

"The machine has been around for about 50 years," he says. "Now you can hook it up to a computer and write a program, and computer-operate the motors. It's a marriage of old and new technology."

Zelek said a problem in the state is an aging population of engineers. If manufacturing is to succeed in Connecticut, today's youth need to become involved.

"This kind of program will enable my students to write programs," he said. "I'll be able to better my skills using this machine. I'll learn about writing the programs; I'm not really a software kind of guy. Now I'll get the experience."

Zelek is one of eight Connecticut high school and college teachers spending part of their summers working at Connecticut manufacturing companies to learn about workplace technology. The program exposes teachers to current manufacturing practices. It allows teachers to upgrade their knowledge so they can provide their students with the skills needed to meet the expectations of today's manufacturing industry.

The Connecticut Business & Industry Association is administering the program on behalf of the 12 Connecticut Community Colleges' College of Technology Regional Center for Next Generation Manufacturing. The program is funded by the National Science Foundation.

The teachers will complete a 160-hour program, which runs from June to September and focuses on

technologies used in manufacturing.

"After the on-the-job training is complete, the teachers develop a work-based learning project for their students, providing a more realistic understanding of how classroom learning is applied on the job," says Lauren Weisberg Kaufman, CBIA's vice president of education and job training policy.

Each teacher receives a $4,000 stipend, which pays for time spent learning in the workplace and implementing the curriculum project in their schools.

"Participating in these externship programs with manufacturing companies across the state gives teachers another tool to help motivate and engage their students and better prepare them for post-secondary education and employment," says Karen Wosczyna-Birch, director of the Regional Center for Next Generation Manufacturing College of Technology.

"I hope through my added knowledge I'll be able to attract more kids to an engineering career," Zelek says.

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