



Commitment to Education: Teel's Approach to Preparing Employees and the Next Generation for a Technical Manufacturing Workplace

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Introduction

Creating a culture that prioritizes training and education is a vital component of Teel's business model. Teel continually seeks out ways to effectively utilize its time and resources to develop a knowledgeable technical workforce from within.

This paper provides a description of Teel's approach to training and education that may offer insights and ideas to businesses, especially manufacturers, who are seeking ways to bolster their employee training programs or serve a broader role in the technical education of their communities.

Teel's educational efforts can be summarized in four main areas of emphasis:

1. Implement policies and a training system that encourage learning and make required training easier to complete and track
2. Apply for education grant opportunities that allow Teel a platform to share its knowledge and bolster employee skills
3. Utilize a variety of apprenticeship programs, and, in addition, become involved in the regulatory development of apprenticeship programs in Wisconsin
4. Engage in outreach to the local community to promote technical careers in manufacturing

Teel's Cultural Support for Education

Teel understands that a company needs to invest in the right policies and tools to create a culture of continual development, and an investment it is, as there is a return on helping to grow and stretch an employee's skills and abilities.

Tuition Reimbursement

One of Teel's most important education initiatives is its 80% education cost reimbursement program. The costs of approved courses, training sessions, and degree programs are reimbursed to the employee up to 80%. This includes tuition, course



registration fees, exam fees, and books upon successful completion. Teel also reimburses students 100% for initial licensing if it is required for a position they are entering.

Since 2012, 14 people have taken advantage of the program, and five have completed degree programs in that time, including a mix of Master's, Bachelor's, and Associate's degrees.

Brian Dobosz, Teel's IT infrastructure manager, finished up an MBA program utilizing Teel's tuition reimbursement program.

Brian had begun his MBA several years prior to being hired by Teel. When he became aware of Teel's program, he was motivated to finish. Signing up for the program was a quick and painless process, he said. Dobosz recounted that he "wasn't a manager at Teel at the time," and that he thought it was "nice that they invested in me to kind of get on that path." Brian was grateful for Teel's financial support. "It's an exceptional program to be able to do any sort of college-based education and not leave it with an enormous amount of debt," he said.

Brian says that his MBA helps make him a better manager. "I think, being in IT, you're kind of siloed on the technology. Having the MBA opens you up to a better understanding of how the whole organization runs and then where we can use the technology to play a role in changing things," he said.



Brian Dobosz in front of Teel's system servers.

Since joining Teel, Brian has been impressed by Teel's emphasis on training and education generally.

"I don't think I've worked anywhere where training is in the forefront like it is here," He said. "There's a considerable amount, and it's in a formalized approach too, which is unique as well. A lot of times that's just an afterthought in other organizations."

Teel You-niversity

For Teel, another step in developing a culture of education has been the introduction of Teel You-niversity. In 2013, Teel implemented the program under the leadership of DeeAnna Deane, Teel's training specialist. Housed on [BizLibrary](#) learning management system (LMS) software, Teel You-niversity allows Teel to deliver a suite of training modules to employees as needed. Employees receive emails when they are assigned a course in the system and, within it, can keep track of their assigned courses and their progress. Employees have access to a variety of off-the shelf training modules (about 10,000 videos) and custom content created by Teel. This content allows HR easy access to a variety of courses to assign employees, but it also allows employees a repository of information when seeking self-directed training on a large array of topics.

The program's tracking abilities allow Teel to maintain a record of both classroom training and ISO compliance training. According to ISO-9001, changes to ISO documents need to be immediately shared with employees, a process made easier with Teel You-niversity. In the past, Teel had distributed paper copies to each employee and a sheet to sign indicating that they had read the document and were made aware of changes. This process was eliminated with Teel You-niversity, as it facilitates easy sharing of training records with auditors.

On average, a total of 850 courses are completed each month within the Teel You-niversity system by employees.

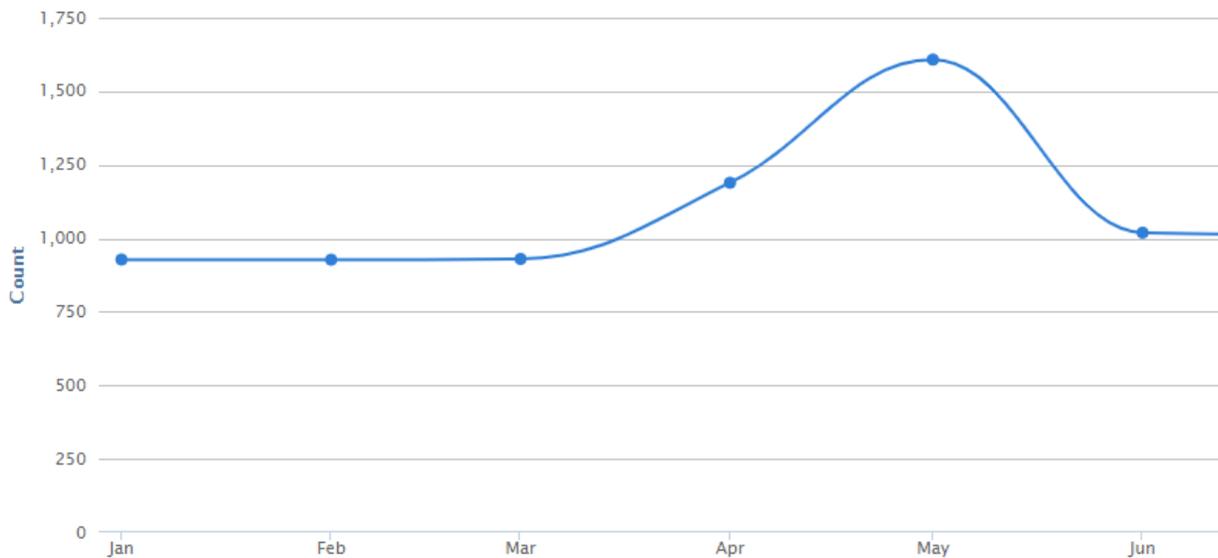


Figure 1: A Teel You-niversity chart tracking the number of training courses completed in the system in Jan-June, 2019

Teel's successful use of the system and the culture change that ensued were even featured on [BizLibrary's website](#).

Using Grant Programs to Bolster Training Options

Seeking support wherever it is available, Teel also applies for grants that allow for additional training opportunities for employees. Teel has taken advantage of several state-specific grant programs to fund a number of training initiatives. "The use of grants is key to being able to provide high quality training with very specific topics to our team," said Training Specialist DeeAnna Deane.

Wisconsin Fast Forward (WFF) Grants



One such grant program is the WFF grant program, signed into law in 2013 to help employers fund training where there are [“documented skill needs not addressed by other training programs.”](#) WFF grant recipients must match the amount awarded by the state 50 cents on the dollar for small business grants, and dollar for dollar for all other loans. “The Wisconsin Fast Forward grants are an amazing opportunity to and we are fortunate to have them available. When a need arises for training that can’t be found in more traditional avenues, the grant will allow you to customize training or find a subject matter expert that will develop training,” said Deane. Teel has received several WFF grants, first, in 2014 and 2015, joining as a participant in two group grant applications that included other companies and educational institutions as partners. Teel then applied for and received its own WFF grants directly in both 2015 and 2017.

Teel’s first independent WFF grant was awarded for a training program focusing specifically on Teel extrusion employees. A total of 108 Teel employees completed both parts of the program.

In 2017, Teel was awarded two more WFF grants. The first was continuous improvement (CI) training, including the DMAIC process, 80/20 rule, and lean manufacturing practices. 161 employees completed the training, which was delivered by Madison College at Teel’s facility. Teel tracked the effect of this training and its return on investment, estimating that the efficiencies gained on CI projects subsequent to this training saved Teel approximately \$200,000.

The second WFF grant awarded in 2017 was for training program focused on injection molding processes in support of Teel’s expansion into the injection molding market. 35 employees completed the training, which was provided by Arburg Technology.

Workforce Advancement Training (WAT) Grants

WAT grants subsidize the cost of training at the Wisconsin Technical College System, allowing Teel to train its employees at Wisconsin technical colleges at 40% or 50% of the typical cost. Teel’s applications for this grant are made by Madison College on Teel’s behalf, and Teel is always a participating member of a joint grant application that includes other employers. The employers and Madison College meet to determine the most pressing training needs and determine if there are enough students from the group of employers to fill a particular class.

“More traditional topics can be covered by a Workforce Advancement Training grant,” said Deane. However, she adds that “the grant does allow for customization of content. So if you have determined that your company needs Excel training for instance, you can specify that you would like more time on [a particular subject] than was included in the original course description. The college will know if there are other employers looking for similar training and may be able to put together a consortium to share the grant.”



Teel has been awarded several, WAT grants, which are usually administered over a two-year duration. The training can be held at Teel's facility, another employer's facility, or one of Madison College's campuses. Classes Teel has participated in through the grants include: Intermediate Electricity, Advanced Leadership, Yellow Belt certification, Robotics II, Spanish for Supervisors, Advanced Excel, Basic Welding, Service Champions, and PLC I.

Contract Training

Occasionally, grant funding for a specific training program is not available, or a training need arises that requires immediate attention that precludes a waiting period to receive grant funds. In such a case, Teel has utilized contract training. Contract training has also been helpful when the training source is more applicable to Teel's needs.

Some contract training is provided by one of Teel's equipment suppliers. Alternatively, Teel will often contract with experts in specific areas to provide training to engineers and technical staff. In 2019, Teel hosted [Tim Womer](#), Society of Plastics Engineers Hall of Famer, for training on screw design. Teel has previously hosted [Dan Cykana](#) for several extrusion specific training sessions. For green and black belt lean manufacturing classes, Teel contracts with the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

Sometimes, partnering with other employers for contract training can result in a cost reduction for an employer. "In general, contracts are priced by the length of the content, not by the number of people attending," said Deane. "So if you can share the learning experience with others, your cost per attendee decreases."

Utilizing and Developing Apprenticeship Programs

Apprenticeships are a critical element of Teel's training philosophy. Beneficial to businesses and students alike, apprenticeships can help accelerate the entrance of trained, practically experienced technical workers into the labor force.

Teel is a member of Wisconsin Apprentice Leaders, an organization working to promote apprenticeship as a career path option – just like attending college or joining the military. Additionally, Deane sits on the Policy and Standards subcommittee for the Bureau of Apprenticeship standards in the state of Wisconsin, where she has a voice in crafting the future of apprenticeship programs in the state. In fact, since the federal apprenticeship program is based on the Wisconsin model, Teel has an influence in promoting and shaping apprenticeship programs throughout the country.

As of 2019, Teel has five registered apprentices and four Youth Apprentices in various departments, including Production, Maintenance, and IT. In addition, Teel employs six journey workers who have completed their apprenticeship programs at Teel through

either a tool and die, industrial electrician, millwright, maintenance technician, or maintenance mechanic apprenticeship program.

The experience of Sam Stolte, a recent graduate of the maintenance technician program at Teel, exemplifies Teel's approach to apprenticeship training.

Starting as a production employee, Stolte demonstrated an aptitude for technical work early on. Operations Manager Jason Kent, one of Sam's mentors, described the identification of Sam's skills and his entrance into the apprenticeship program:

"Sam was a strong production employee with identified technical skills. Sam quickly became an operator technician and always wanted more responsibility at Teel. It was determined that Sam and Teel would benefit from the state apprenticeship program. Teel approached Sam with the program and in true Sam fashion he jumped at the opportunity."

Stolte's experience is an example of Teel's approach to cultivating a skilled workforce from within, using programs like the Wisconsin state apprenticeship program to help develop the abilities of employees who show promise in a particular area. When someone does show promise, said Deane, "We really want to grow that person's skills." Actively investing in the skills of employees through apprenticeships has been mutually beneficial to students like Sam and to Teel. Given the limited number of technical workers and the broad array of industries in our modern economy, finding workers with skills and experience in precisely the work Teel does can be challenging. Apprenticeship programs are one way to circumvent this challenge, and allow Teel to customize a worker's training to its operations. In addition, those whom Teel enrolls in the program tend to remain with the company longer. "I think they see that the company is willing to invest in them," said Deane. "They see what a good thing it is for them."

As of 2019, Teel also participates in Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship (YA) program. "Youth apprenticeships," Deane said, are an "inexpensive way for students to grow into a good paying and rewarding career."



Sam and Dustin with Sam's certificate of apprenticeship completion



From left to right: Sam Stolte, Maintenance Manager Dustin Steinhorst, Operations Manager Jason Kent



Wisconsin's YA program allows high school juniors and seniors to gain paid experience and academic credit for work in a chosen career pathway while they take related coursework. School districts may choose to opt in to the program with funding from Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development. Upon completion, apprentices receive a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency signed by Wisconsin's secretary of state.



From left to right: Extrusion Production Manager Craig Harsch, Apprentices Evan Woodruff and Caitlyn Shackelford, HR Manager DeeAnna Deane, Extrusion Operations Supervisor Jesse Phillippi, and Maintenance Manager Dustin Steinhorst.

The program has successfully placed students into paying careers. David Anliker, technical education instructor at Reedsburg Area High School, oversees the apprentices from his school. "Most of our students are offered employment after graduation," he said, adding many students "are three to five years out still working at the same employer where they apprenticed."

Two of Teel's first YAs were Evan Woodruff, working in the Maintenance department under Maintenance Manager Dustin Steinhorst and Caitlyn

Shackelford, working in the Production Department under Extrusion Operations Supervisor Jesse Phillippi. Evan and Caitlyn are not unfamiliar with the industry, as they each have a parent who works in manufacturing. Both apprentices have impressed Teel staff with their work ethic and eagerness to learn.

Evan and Caitlyn have enjoyed their time at Teel, and agree it's been a helpful learning experience. Evan likes the wide range of work he has been assigned so far. "In my department," he said, there are "so many varieties of projects to do." It's "different every day."

"I'm just more of a hands on person," said Caitlyn, describing what drew her to manufacturing. She is enjoying her work on the production line, and especially enjoys the work of tearing down the machines at the end of the week.

Teel is glad to have Evan and Caitlyn onboard and encourages other students and businesses to get involved in the YA program.

Reaching out to the Community

Teel's commitment to education also extends beyond its own employees, and includes hosting events and tours at its facilities as a service to the surrounding community and the promotion of manufacturing as a career choice.

"Connecting with the community is very important to us, especially when we can show students what real life at work is like," said DeeAnna Deane. "Showing our high tech facility goes a long way in building our image in their eyes. Students visit and develop an interest, making them curious to learn more. Some have been here to visit several times. Sometimes this translates into them seeking jobs here in the future, either starting as Youth Apprentices or after high school or college."

DeeAnna sees a special importance in hosting tours for young people. "We have an aging workforce," she said, emphasizing the need to attract more students to manufacturing. The tours are a way to help students see that "you can really make a good and livable wage by working here," she added. When DeeAnna gives her presentation to visiting students, she stresses the tuition reimbursement plan Teel offers. When they hear that Teel offers 80% tuition reimbursement to employees, DeeAnna said, "You should see the looks in the kids' eyes."

Tours of professional facilities like Teel can benefit students by helping them connect the theoretical knowledge they learn in the classroom to its practical use in industry. Seeing how their academic work applies to, and is preparing them, for a professional career can help motivate more practically inclined students, especially. In addition, tours can acquaint students with the type of work environment they can expect if they were to pursue a particular career.

In May of 2019, Teel had the opportunity to provide tours to two classes from Reedsburg Area High School, the first time the school has sent tour groups. The first group was an Organic Biochemistry class that had just finished a polymer unit and the other was an AP chemistry class. Both were taught by science instructor Corinne Fish, who heard of Teel's tours from her niece, Teel Operations Planning Manager Lisa Zelt.



Lisa Zelt gives a tour of a Teel manufacturing facility to Reedsburg Chemistry students

Fish, who has about 29 years of teaching experience, was happy to have the chance to show students practical examples of what she had been saying in class. “I think it’s extremely valuable,” she said of the tours, as most of her students had not previously been to a manufacturing facility. “To see how much technology there is in every job,” she added, “I think is important for them.” Teel’s analytical lab is a key draw, Fish said, as it serves as a helpful illustrative tool for Chemistry classes in particular. Fish was also impressed with the Teel facility as a whole: “The facility is beautiful. I can’t believe it’s actually been here 12 years,” she said.



Reedsburg AP Chemistry class and Teel staff

After the first tour, Fish held a debriefing with her class and discussed what they had seen. “They thought it was really neat,” she said. Later, one of Fish’s students approached her with a photo on her phone. The student works at a local cheese manufacturer that uses Teel’s bag products. “She goes, ‘Look! I found the bags at my work!’” Fish said. For this student at least, the Teel tour provided a helpful insight into the use and impact of Teel’s products.

Those interested can contact [DeeAnna Deane](#) to schedule a tour for your class or group today.

Conclusion

Teel’s educational focus, investment, and outreach shape the culture of the company. From internal policy, to training tools, to apprenticeships, to outreach, education is a vital component of the way Teel operates.

“In general, my advice to other companies is to actively seek out training opportunities. Build policies that help grow the skills of your team. There is nothing in business more mutually beneficial than providing your team with ways to succeed. People have a thirst for knowledge and it is our pleasure to provide them with education. You will see the return on investment in a happier workforce eager to use their new skills to help build your business,” Deane said.

For more information on Teel’s training program and tools, please contact [DeeAnna Deane](#).