A study released in 2011 by Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute found that more than 80% of manufacturers report they cannot find employees to fill their skilled production jobs. Darlene Miller, president and CEO of Permac Industries, understands; the skills gap exacts a heavy price on small businesses like hers. Every employee who runs the precision manufacturing company’s sophisticated equipment serves a critical role in Permac’s continued competitiveness. So how do you find the talent you need without the internal capacity to meet all your training needs? Miller, who also serves on the President’s Council on Jobs and Competitiveness and co-chairs the High Tech Education Subcommittee, knows that power lies in partnership. So, in 2011, when she could not find seven computer numerical control (CNC) operators—a high number for the small shop—Miller worked closely with other precision machine shops to convene two regional community colleges, The Manufacturing Institute, ACT, and the National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS). Together, they created a fast-track solution to begin addressing the skills gap crisis in their area called Right Skills Now.

A large number of Right Skills Now students are young adults under 24. Through the program, they gain the training and skills needed to start a successful career in manufacturing. Launched in Minnesota where Permac is headquartered, the program has now expanded to 10 states. Typically, students undergo accelerated CNC operator immersion training through a partner community college for about 16 weeks of class and shop experience. Afterward, they begin an 8-week internship that provides college credit to develop and test their on-the-job skills. Graduates receive NIMS credentials that reflect a growing movement in the manufacturing sector to promote portable, industry-recognized certifications that help both employees and employers. The certifications also count toward an associate's degree and can serve as a foundation for other accreditation.

Permac experiences a number of business benefits through the accelerated learning program. The company gains a source of workers with relevant skills far more quickly than it would have waiting for students to graduate from a traditional two-year program. Moreover, because training is conducted through a local college, connecting to talent is easier, as local partners facilitate the process. So far Permac has hired four Right Skills Now graduates, each important for the 30-person shop. Right Skills Now feeds the talent pipeline of many other shops around the country.

Media attention to the program has increased awareness of the manufacturing industry’s issues and provides a successful model to address the industry’s talent challenges. Partners and leaders of the program, including Miller, are targeting nationwide rollout even beyond the expansion that has already happened. The result: Right Skills Now serves as a testament to how proactive leadership and strategic partnerships can work together to solve problems for the collective good.


"Power in Partnership: Permac Industries Collaborates to Close the Skills Gap" appeared in Making Youth Employment Work: Essential Elements for a Successful Strategy. To access the full report, visit uschamberfoundation.org/CEW.