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**Anthony Westbury: Mapping the workforce gap in
St. Lucie County**

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Ironworker Sean Mitchell said the average age of a welder in the U.S. is 55, according to statistics from the American Welding Society,

Bill Wilcox, owner of a Fort Pierce aviation-support company that produces stairways for aircraft including Air Force One, said several of his workers have had to delay their retirement because there are not enough qualified applicants to replace them.

It's not just a Treasure Coast problem. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce reported that by 2020 the U.S. is expected to face a shortage of 5 million workers who are equipped with technical certificates and industry credentials.

Mitchell, of Ironworkers Local Union 402 in West Palm Beach, and Wilcox of Phoenix Metals were two of about 70 people who attended Wednesday's Skills Gap Summit convened by the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County.

The EDC is working on how to provide a fully skilled workforce that reflects the needs of current and potential new employers. This year, the EDC commissioned a Treasure Coast Skills Gap Study that focuses on healthcare, manufacturing and skilled trades — the areas where most growth is expected on the Treasure Coast.

The goal of the report is to pinpoint where gaps exist between the education system and the needs of end-users (industry) now and in the future. Are the K-12 and higher-education systems producing sufficient graduates with the requisite technical skills to satisfy demand? What changes in curriculum and emphasis would achieve that goal? What exactly do local employers want or lack in their labor forces?

The room at the Schreiber Conference Center at Indian River State College Pruitt Campus in St. Lucie West was filled with educators, employment experts, a few politicians and representatives from companies as large as Florida Power & Light.

I sat at a table representing the manufacturing industry. The conversation was at times quite revealing. We have traditionally encouraged high school students to go to college, when perhaps that wasn't the correct career path for some individuals. At the same time, hands-on industrial skills instruction often has been the Cinderella of the education system.

Yes, many high schools do offer vocational education opportunities with career academies. In practice though, some of those courses do not translate well to apprenticeships or other directly usable qualifications for the industries they are supposed to be serving. Sometimes there's silo thinking that separates industry and educators.

Wilcox noted we have to get away from the notion that "dirty" work is inferior. He is a strong believer in hands-on education, and he encourages class visits to his manufacturing plant. He admitted his openness is not shared by some of his peers.

"Manufacturing traditionally has held people at arm's length in our plants," Wilcox said.

Some companies claim liability and safety concerns prevent students from being on the factory floor, but not Wilcox.

"We think the risk is worth it," he said, noting how his company holds family days for employees' families to learn what dad does at work.

Wilcox also uses school field trips to his facility to actively engage students in hands-on work. Recently, he presented some of these students with a pile of scrap metal and told them to make something. They crafted furniture out of the pile, impressing Wilcox with their abilities.

But employers like Wilcox remain the exception rather than the rule. One way to change that attitude is to market what goes on in local manufacturing plants, some members of my group suggested. The education system needs to offer more "externships" so teachers and instructors can learn what's happening on the shop floor. There need to be more internships and an expansion of the apprenticeship system to allow students the chance to experience what work is all about, others said.

There were plenty of good ideas from both sides, but what really struck me is there is nobody acting as a clearinghouse to pull labor supply and demand together.

I've written before in praise of the Executive Round Table of St. Lucie County as an example of a board that really makes things happen in the world of children's issues. The top educators, law enforcement, juvenile justice, DCF officials, politicians and others meet monthly to discuss areas of concern about kids. Sometimes they're able to anticipate problems before they occur. The Round Table has, in the past, initiated community conversations about gangs, AIDS/HIV awareness and other big issues.

Something similar is badly needed in the world of work.

The EDC is ready to step up and fill that gap, senior vice president Pete Tesch said after the summit ended.

"We've talked about creating a CEO-level advisory board — perhaps for separate industries — to interact with schools, Keiser University, IRSC and other training providers," he said. "We need to be the clearinghouse for industrial education."

Coordinating that will be a tremendous undertaking for his small organization, Tesch admitted, but it needs to be done if the region is ever to rise above its current inefficient state.

As the economy recovers and job demand increases, the need for a coordinated technical education system will become even more pressing. There are a lot of very capable people working in separate groups on this endeavor; we need to bring them together. The EDC could be the catalyst to get us there.

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