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Transformational technologies in the sheet metal industry are also securing more work hours

The Dusty Robotics FieldPrinter is transforming the construction industry. “I call it a Roomba with a laser printer,” says Tim Myres, co-administrator of Sheet Metal Workers Local 104 and Bay Area Industry Training Fund, which covers five separate Joint Apprentice and Training Centers (JATCs) in northern California. “The laser printer drives around the construction site and sprays blueprint markings on the floor.”

He sees even bigger changes on the horizon, and looks to cooperation between the Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA), for opportunities to leverage those changes into more work hours.

“I think we’re close to producing ductwork on 3D printers,” he says. “Relativity Space in LA already makes 90% of their rockets on 3D printers.”

Andre Mayes, membership development coordinator for SMART Local 71, encourages every worker to plan for a high-tech future. “We’ve got to incorporate these advances into our schools.”

Nine times out of ten, the biggest obstacle to learning new technology isn’t interest, but cost. “Technology is not cheap,” says International Training Institute (ITI) Administrator Mike Harris. “That’s why the ITI created several grant programs to make it more affordable for JATCs to acquire technology for training. We help schools get welding equipment, press brakes or other machinery.”

ITI’s new Director of Research, Development, and Technology, David St. Peter, modernized the Local 265 JATC in Carol Stream, Illinois. “After ITI came out with the grant program, everything opened wide up,” says St. Peter. “The JATC made about three technology purchases a year.”

“The Local 265 JATC threw out their old drafting tables years ago and went strictly to computer-aided drafting because the majority of new technologies work off electronic models,” says Harris. “Local 265 gives apprentices an immersive experience from the beginning of their apprenticeship.”

Each JATC customizes training to the local market. Glenn Parvin, owner of Custom Architectural Sheet Specialists, can keep his school up to date because he knows local trends in

the architectural sector. “I sit on the JATC in Detroit, and we’re always talking about training needs,” he says.

SMART Local 104 is finishing a new JATC which includes all-new technology but is also more like an actual job site than ever before. Their motto is: “The Building Teaches.”

The heart of the school is an open area around a two-story steel frame students will use for installation practice. To give apprentices experience with actual equipment, the HVAC systems in the building will be the training labs.

Three technology and three traditional classrooms adjoin the central area. The classrooms have high glass walls so students can see the central steel frame during discussions. The other walls are huge whiteboards instructors can cover with diagrams and instructions. There are no ceiling tiles, so students can see functioning examples of ductwork overhead during class.

Mastering technology gives SMART members a competitive edge. “If we can bid a project that used to take ten individuals and finish it with seven, our contractor can go out and bid more jobs,” Myres says. “That creates work hours for us. I don’t think non-union labor looks at it that way. I don’t believe they embrace technology and train in technology to the extent we do. When we learn new skills, we elevate ourselves as true craftsmen.”

The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) have a labor management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org

