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# Training program spells out workplace expectations



NYPRO Healthcare employees in Clinton work in a "clean room" where medical devices are made. Nypro is among the clients using Operon's training program. (T&G Staff/STEVE LANAVA)

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Not showing up to work, habitual tardiness and having a negative attitude are among reasons employees can be fired — but sometimes, individuals new to the workforce need a firm reminder.

Operon Resource Management in Lowell provides job training and workforce solutions for healthcare product manufacturers, including medical device and pharmaceutical companies. Steve Sawin, its president and chief executive officer, said he saw reports of poor work ethic across a number of industries and decided to do something about it.

"Something needed to be done to burn images in the back of the brains of people as to the elements of good work ethic," Mr. Sawin said. Operon invested in actors and a script and created a training program using graphics and videotape to appeal to a media-savvy generation of workers.

"It's a universal problem across the country," Mr. Sawin said, referring to workplace shortcomings involving attendance, teamwork, attitude, organization, appearance, initiative and productivity.

"Our program attempts to send a message to entry level young employees: work smarter instead of harder. We make it clear what is expected of them and spell out the consequences if the message is not heeded — including termination," he said.

Mr. Sawin noted that a lot of the behavior they expect from employees boils down to common sense.

But in many cases, the workers had never been told what was acceptable and unacceptable in the workplace before it was too late.

"There is a trend of people late for work or giving very short notice they won't be in — like an hour before — if they show up at all," Mr. Sawin explained. "And when they pull this kind of stuff and get called out for it, they are truly flabbergasted. That's why we created this (program) to help them understand the expectations."

Although Operon deals in the highly regulated medical device industry, the emphasis on teamwork, productivity and initiative can apply to any setting, he added.

Mr. Sawin said that if the training can influence even a small percentage of incoming employees, the effort will be worth it. "We want people with a positive can-do attitude and aptitude to learn. For them, it's worth spending the time teaching these skills," he said.

Nypro, in Clinton, is among the clients using Operon's training program. Nypro does product design, production, tooling and distribution for the healthcare and packaging industries. Al Cotton, director of communications, said there is a definite need to teach "work ethic" skills.

"Many, if not most employees, do not understand the environment they are coming into," Mr. Cotton said. "There is a teamwork setting and they need to understand the interpersonal skills: Work with others in a polite manner, be on time and know the safety practices."

"It's real life," he added. "It gets them to see a world they haven't seen before. They need to know that if the rules are not followed, they could get hurt. It's crucial they understand how to be safe, do a good job and give the customer what they need."

In addition to sharing its module with about a dozen clients, Operon put it in the hands of high schools and colleges that are preparing students for the workplace.

At Mount Wachusett Community College in Gardner, the elements of Operon's program are incorporated into its non-credit Advanced Manufacturing Industrial Readiness Training Program (AMIRT), funded through a state Department of Labor grant.

MWCC Dean of Workforce Development John Henshaw said that the curriculum responds to gaps identified by area and national employers. The six-week AMIRT runs 30 hours per week and includes technical skills and computerized CareerReady 101 curriculum in addition to workplace success content.

Instructors Christian Reifsteck and Meghan Koslowski said that classes are comprised of students ranging in age from very young to older people seeking to supplement their retirement.

Teaching "student success skills," is an important part of what they do, Mr. Reifsteck said.

They referred to a University of Massachusetts Dartmouth study of 1,000 advanced manufacturing companies across the state that showed that above all, employers are looking for workers who are reliable and trustworthy.

"Employers said they would take someone without the hard skills (experience in manufacturing) if they had soft skills like reliability with 90 percent willing to train that person," Ms. Koslowski said.

So far, Mr. Sawin said that he is pleased with the impact the training has made.

"We're not setting the world on fire, but things are getting better. There's been a noticeable uptick in the work ethic of employees."