

# Northwest Georgia: Partnering to Connect Workers to Jobs in the Floor Covering Industry

The Northwest Georgia Regional Workforce Partnership is developing a new talent pipeline for employment in local advanced manufacturing industries, with an initial focus on the floor covering industry. The new education and training pipeline builds on the local public school system's college and career academy infrastructure and will connect high school students and graduates to advanced manufacturing jobs that business leaders indicate are difficult to fill. Floor covering industry leaders played a principal role in creating a curriculum that will prepare students for a wide variety of manufacturing-related occupations, are providing financial and technical supports to the program, and will offer work-based learning experiences to high school students, giving them a foundation in advanced manufacturing that will prepare them to enter the local manufacturing workforce or continue on to higher education after graduation.

## A RENAISSANCE INDUSTRY

Dalton, Georgia, is the "Carpet Capital of the World." More than 85 percent of inventory destined for the United States carpet and rug market and 70 percent of output worldwide is produced by mills located within a 65-mile radius of Dalton, in and around Whitfield County. The concentration of connected vendors, suppliers, and support industries makes the floor covering industry the No. 1 employer in the region and a significant economic engine for Northwest

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- To address large-scale, endemic workforce development challenges in a region, don't start by trying to get a large number of businesses involved. Start with a small "coalition of the willing" among companies with related talent pipeline challenges and an interest in developing new solutions.
- Use on-the-ground research such as resident and worker interviews to uncover perceptions and deep-seated barriers that get in the way of developing talent.
- Look for the right business leaders—not just those with the loftiest job titles—to engage in the effort, and define success as simply how much action business leaders are willing to take to address their workforce challenges.
- Find indicators of early progress or milestones when ultimate outcomes, such as a new cadre of skilled workers who get jobs in the sector, are years away.

Georgia. To remain competitive, businesses in the regional cluster have invested in and adopted new technologies over a short period of time that respond to 21st-century economic, technological, and market changes. Because the industry has diversified and advanced so quickly, it has been difficult for employers to find

workers who are schooled in state-of-the-art technologies and trained on new equipment.

The floor covering industry has historically followed the peaks and valleys of the housing industry, but today the floor covering industry serves a more diverse market and encompasses a range of products beyond carpets and rugs. “It’s not your granddaddy’s carpet mill,” to quote a local industry leader—a sentiment echoed across the region by industry and educators. Coming out of the economic downturn, firms have retooled manufacturing processes to incorporate technology and conservation strategies to support a more sustainable industry. Resilient flooring, wood flooring, and ceramic wall and floor tile all constitute this industry cluster. As the industry has diversified and advanced, it needs workers trained on a new suite of skills and equipment to meet myriad changing requirements.

## **A RELUCTANT WORKFORCE**

Recent labor force predictions for Northwest Georgia indicate that thousands of

manufacturing jobs will need to be filled in the near future, and the majority of them will be in the floor covering industry. Many positions in floor covering production require skills in mechatronics [electrical, mechanical, or other engineering skills]. Positions such as industrial maintenance workers, electronics technicians, and electricians are going unfilled because candidates with the necessary skills are in short supply.

Manufacturing employs 25 percent of Northwest Georgia’s workforce, yet less than 5 percent of high school students are enrolled in manufacturing-related career education and training programs in one of the region’s five college and career academies. Historically, flooring manufacturers have drawn new workers from among the population of students who complete high school but do not go on to college. In recent years, few high school graduates have pursued flooring manufacturing employment. In an increasingly tight labor market, manufacturing employers in Northwest Georgia are faced with a number

## **COMMUNITIES THAT WORK PARTNERSHIP**

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Seven regional teams were selected competitively in July 2015. Teams comprised three to four leaders and, importantly, included a private industry partner representing employer voice. The regional team in Northwest Georgia included the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission, J+J Flooring Group, the Technical College System of Georgia, and the Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce. The partners collaborated to advance industry-led workforce development strategies in their region. AspenWSI and a core management team facilitated peer learning and leadership development for the Communities that Work Partnership and documented their efforts in order to accelerate learning in the field. The seven Partnership Briefs are part of a package of learning materials to be released in the fall of 2016, available at [as.pn/communitiesthatwork](http://as.pn/communitiesthatwork).

of challenges to obtaining the necessary workforce. This is, in part, due to:

- A high number of employees aging toward retirement—a trend that is expected to continue.
- Perceptions about employment in the industry, based on what employers note are outdated notions of loud, dirty, and dangerous work environments that require little knowledge or skill.
- The flooring industry continuing to adopt advanced technologies that require skills and knowledge not readily found among current job applicants.
- The increase in the percentage of the population who earn bachelor's degrees, from 6.1 percent in 1990 to 10.3 percent in 2013. College graduates, many of whom remain in the region, are not connecting to employment in the floor covering industry.

## ADVANCED MANUFACTURING AND BUSINESS ACADEMY

The Northwest Georgia Regional Workforce Partnership—composed of leaders representing the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission, the Technical College System of Georgia, the Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce, and J&J Flooring Group—initially organized with support from the Economic Development Administration's "Investing in Manufacturing Communities" initiative. Planners for an Advanced Manufacturing and Business Academy (AMBA) at the Northwest Georgia College and Career Academy in Whitfield County grew to include a working group of leaders representing seven floor covering manufacturing firms.<sup>1</sup>

Scheduled to launch in fall 2016, AMBA is a four-year program to prepare high school

## Northwest Georgia Workforce Partnership: Industry Leaders

- Alrol of America
- Beaulieu
- Engineered Floors
- IVC Group (purchased by Mohawk Industries)
- J+J Flooring
- Mohawk Industries
- Shaw Industries

students with essential academic knowledge and employment skills for the diversity of jobs and careers available in manufacturing in the region or for pursuing higher education in a related field. AMBA boasts three primary tracks: advanced manufacturing, logistics, and corporate administration. Many of the courses within AMBA will be eligible for dual-enrollment credit with the Georgia Northwestern Technical College or Dalton State College.

AMBA freshmen and sophomores will take courses and labs at the Academy; juniors and seniors will participate in paid apprenticeships three days per week and focus on academic courses the other two days. Work-based learning is an important component of AMBA. Apprenticeships will not only provide on-the-job paid training to students, but also afford businesses a means for transferring institutional knowledge from workers nearing retirement age to a new generation of employees. Partnership leaders report that this potential is especially appealing to a number of local businesses involved in the program development process.

**For more information about the program, visit Advanced Manufacturing and Business Academy at <http://ngca.whitfield.k12.ga.us/>**

<sup>1</sup> College and career academies in Georgia are special high schools that provide learning environments that focus educational resources on what is needed by the businesses in the community and prepare the future workforce for local employment.

## ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Two hundred incoming freshmen are enrolled to begin at AMBA in August 2016. What are some of the factors that AMBA developers note as having contributed to these early wins?

### A Responsive Alliance

Leaders from seven floor covering businesses, self-described as fierce competitors, decided early on that they would take shared ownership of solutions to their labor force challenge. As they worked to create AMBA, they explicitly focused on the challenge: the lack of an appropriately trained workforce in the region. Participating business leaders have noted that this explicit focus—achieved by, for example, avoiding or redirecting conversations that might reveal proprietary information or raise issues of “ownership” of group efforts to establish public education infrastructure—allowed them to create a sense of trust and shared purpose among competitors.

### The Right People

Individuals engaged in planning had support from their firms’ top management to participate in meetings and to donate their time to the initiative. All had authority to make decisions on behalf of the companies they represented, which played a key role in expediting the planning and development process. The representatives from the seven businesses are all in human resources, working within their companies to fill job openings and train and develop a skilled workforce. As one of these individuals pointed out, they are in the best position to communicate the hiring needs of their companies. But working group members also noted that it was important that they engaged with other knowledgeable experts within their firms, so they conveyed information from staff representing a range of roles, from CEOs to shop floor supervisors. Several of the participating companies have in-house training programs, which helped with the

“Accept that EVERYBODY doesn’t have to be at the table. Go with the coalition of the willing now instead of waiting to bring everybody on board.”

– Local Industry Leader

development of the AMBA curriculum. And two are board members of a local school district and a career academy, bringing a strong working relationship with college and career academy leadership.

### The Right Number of People

Members reported having been engaged in past initiatives that stalled under the weight of trying to engage large numbers of stakeholders. They wanted to avoid that. Leaders engaged in the AMBA effort reported that being a small group helped them to keep things moving forward. One of the business leaders volunteered as the coordinator, facilitator, and communicator among the participating businesses and held other business representatives accountable for making progress on tasks they volunteered to do between meetings. One of the members noted that for a cooperative initiative of this type to be successful, business leaders must be able to answer the questions, “Why am I here? What is it you want? How long is it going to take?” They also noted that later on, after getting things off the ground, early members started serving as champions, bringing additional industry leaders to the table and soliciting critical participation and input as the education and training program currently recruits students and prepares to launch. This continuing validation by industry is expected to help ensure that the new education program’s leaders are well-positioned to engage substantively with more and more industry representatives.

## The Right Investments

Industry leaders are investing in the AMBA program in a variety of ways. They are building labs, providing instructors, donating and moving equipment, and providing work-based learning experiences for students. Importantly, they appear to have long-term plans for extending their companies into the education community. They are developing and participating in marketing and awareness activities to raise the profile of manufacturing career opportunities—and AMBA as a stepping-stone to prepare for them. They are keenly interested in supporting the establishment of metrics and long-term monitoring that will help the Academy and the business community to understand the role AMBA plays as a workforce pipeline. The following are some examples of industry investments in AMBA.

- **Infrastructure and Expertise:** Shaw Industries donated substantial funds toward the development of AMBA's mechatronics lab. The firm also donated employee time to

build out the lab space, including electrical and HVAC infrastructure, and transported and installed equipment it donated to the lab. For an AMBA logistics lab course, Shaw Industries donated new software and is providing an adjunct instructor to teach the course.

- **Apprenticeships and Work-Based Learning Opportunities:** All seven businesses have committed to providing paid apprenticeships to AMBA students during their junior and senior years in the program.
- **Outcomes and Performance:** Recognizing that schools lack the capacity for the type of long-term tracking AMBA will need to conduct to obtain data about students' employment outcomes, Mohawk Industries has offered to fund longitudinal tracking of AMBA students post-graduation.
- **Marketing AMBA and Manufacturing Careers:** Several participating companies developed a marketing campaign that is being implemented by the college and career academy to attract students to AMBA. They covered the costs to design

## ACKNOWLEDGING INNOVATION—AND CHALLENGES

The successful development of AMBA challenges the ways in which the public sector has traditionally engaged the business community. The AMBA business partnership didn't define success simply by how many names could be signed up for input; rather, it was defined by how much action business leaders could take. And the right people—not just those with the loftiest job titles—were engaged in advancing the strategy. Communities that Work Partnership leaders acknowledged some of the struggles that can be involved in keeping business leaders engaged in community initiatives:

- Losing a company's participation when a champion leaves a position and other leaders in the company have no buy-in;
- "Initiative fatigue" with staff who are frequently called on to participate in multiple initiatives—particularly when there are redundancies across community programs and initiatives; and
- Stalling "in committee" without clear tasks to accomplish—or stalling without demonstrating early progress or milestones when ultimate outcomes, like employment upon completion of a training program, are years away.

## ROLES FOR NEW BUSINESS PARTNERS

- Provide parents, school administrators, and guidance counselors plant tours to help change negative perceptions about local manufacturing employment.
- Provide ongoing input into AMBA curriculum design and content, as needed, to keep the program relevant to their employment skill needs.
- Supply in-kind contributions of materials and/manufacturing equipment for AMBA labs.
- Serve as subject-matter experts and representatives of the industry, and speak to students enrolled in AMBA courses.
- Participate in a working group of manufacturing human resource leaders to provide ongoing support for and input into AMBA's apprenticeship program.
- Commit to provide apprenticeship opportunities for AMBA students.
- Commit to interview AMBA graduates for full-time positions.

and produce flyers, brochures, banners, and AMBA's website. Marketing also includes a variety of activities to educate school staff, parents, and students about work in the floor covering industry. For example, staff from all the major companies have met with guidance counselors, principals, and teachers. They have also held open houses and career fairs at their manufacturing facilities.

- **Leadership and Engagement:** The investment by companies of their key executives' time and expertise has been critical to the advancement of this new initiative. Company leaders met with relevant community stakeholders, developed curricula, and championed the pipeline effort on behalf of their industry.

### GOING FORWARD

AMBA's industry leaders and partnership members are currently working to raise greater awareness of the program in the larger business community. Their goal is to encourage more businesses—including those outside of the floor covering industry—to become involved. Following their own advice, they have a range of very specific ways that they will ask businesses to engage.

AMBA industry leaders recognize that being able to demonstrate the ultimate success of the program (measured by graduates obtaining jobs with local manufacturing companies) is several years away. They've expressed keen interest in remaining engaged so they can learn about early implementation progress, challenges, and successes. They want to be in a position to provide ongoing support to the program as it gets off the ground and begins serving students. They've expressed the hope that other college and career academies will adapt programming based on AMBA to prepare young people for employment opportunities specific to their communities. And while the floor covering subsector has been its initial focus, the regional partnership hopes its workforce development strategies will translate to other manufacturing sectors, with their own workforce development needs, in the larger Georgia-Tennessee-Alabama tristate region. As one participant noted, "There are opportunities for this model to be replicated because there are similar needs across the region. The main ingredient for replication is community members who are inspired by the initiative and want to see it replicated in their community. The question is, "Who will lead these efforts?"