

THE BIKE RIDE TO A MANUFACTURING CAREER

Seventeen-year-old Ben had bought dress pants and a shirt for a summer job interview. He was excited about the opportunity. His mother was excited for him, too.

There was just one problem: She couldn't get him to the interview 13 miles away.

The family lived in Woodstock. The manufacturing company where he had been offered a high school internship was in Harvard. His mother had a younger child to get to summer camp and a job of her own miles in the opposite direction. The transportation math simply didn't work.

"I don't have the heart to tell him I can't do this," his mother had told Maria Andrade, coordinator of events and outreach for the Workforce Division at McHenry County College.

So Andrade, alongside people from the McHenry County Manufacturing Pathways Consortium, figured out a solution.

They turned to public transportation systems. When bus schedules were not accommodating, they found a way thanks to Metra – and a bicycle. The student's family would get him to the Woodstock Metra station, where he locked his bicycle to the bike rack. Each day, the teenager would take the train, retrieve his bike and ride roughly 15 to 20 minutes to the manufacturing company. Some days he opted to walk to the plant.

At the end of the day, he reversed the trip. The walk or the bike weren't the points. The opportunity was.

Students, parents, manufacturers, and community partners are working together to build a manufacturing workforce for the future in McHenry County.

One of the manufacturers helping make that possible is Xact Wire EDM Corp. of Cary.

Workforce development isn't something that happens only inside his company's four walls, says Xact Wire Division Manager Jason Mueller, who also co-leads the Career Awareness and Discovery team within the Manufacturing Pathways Consortium. The organization aims to connect students with manufacturers throughout McHenry County.

Xact has become an active participant in the effort, opening its doors to high school interns, supporting alternative talent pathways, and investing in the kind of manufacturing ecosystem where a stronger workforce benefits everyone.

It is a simple philosophy: When the tide rises, all boats rise with it.



ARPA SUPPORT HELPS XACT WIRE INVEST, IMPROVE AND GROW

The use of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to support Illinois manufacturers has demonstrated how strategic public investment can strengthen the businesses that anchor our communities. Through funding provided to IMEC, resources were made available to help manufacturers pursue projects that otherwise might have been delayed or out of reach. Xact Wire is a strong example of how those dollars can translate into meaningful investments in a local manufacturer and its future.

IMEC worked with Xact Wire on two projects, which helped the company identify opportunities to improve its operations, strengthen its capabilities and position itself for continued growth. Rather than simply providing financial assistance, the ARPA investment helped connect Xact Wire with the knowledge and technical support needed to turn an identified opportunity into a practical improvement for the business.

The impact extends beyond Xact Wire itself. When we invest in the competitiveness of a manufacturer, we are also investing in its employees, suppliers, customers, and the broader manufacturing ecosystem that supports our communities. ARPA funding gave IMEC the ability to reach manufacturers with timely assistance at a critical moment, and the work with Xact Wire shows what can happen when those resources are combined with a company's willingness to invest and improve.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mary Hallock'.

Mary Hallock
Director of Special Initiatives
Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center

A MANUFACTURER SHARING ITS WORKFORCE

Xact is one of the largest specialized wire electrical discharge machining (EDM) companies in the country, according to Mueller. The company uses electrically charged wire to cut extremely precise shapes in hard, electrically conductive metals. The company serves demanding markets including medical, surgical, dental, defense, tooling, stamping dies, and mold work.

Precision and quality are critically fundamental to Xact.

That's where Xact's partnership with the Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center (IMEC) comes into the story.

Through two McHenry County American Rescue Plan Act-funded projects, IMEC strengthened Xact's operational capabilities and quality systems. One project was an automation assessment identifying opportunities to increase productivity and production capacity. The assessment began by looking at where Xact was and where it wanted to go.

Dean Harms, IMEC regional manager, said the process was designed to identify potential applications for automation, while also determining what needed to happen before automation could be effectively deployed.

"Assessments really do provide information," Harms said. "This is where you're at. We talk about where you want to be. How do you get there?"

That distinction is important. IMEC examined Xact's current state, its desired future state, and potential gaps that could affect an automation investment. The assessment also included return-on-investment considerations.

The goal was to give Xact the information it needed to make better investment decisions.

A second project in 2025 focused on people. It included internal auditor training to help Xact employees strengthen the company's quality management system.

THE LIGHT BULB GOES ON

The training taught employees what to look for, how to document their findings, and how individual processes connect to the company's quality standards.

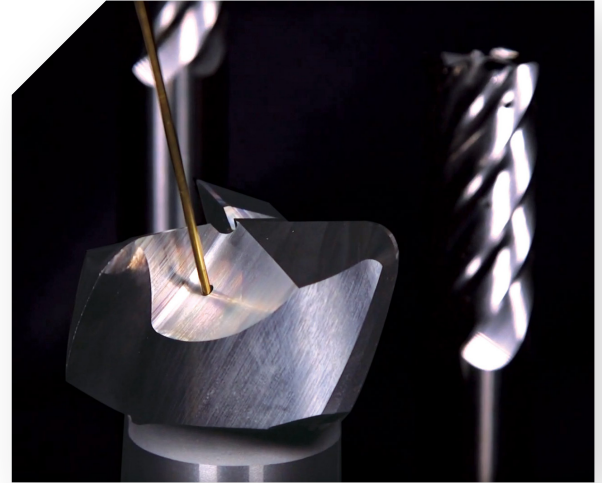
For Mueller, the most important result was seeing employees understand why the system mattered.

"By joining the auditing team, they finally understood the importance of each aspect within the plant," Mueller said.

Employees who had been trained began conducting audits alongside Xact's established auditors. Eventually, they started performing audits independently.

"They're part of the audit team," Mueller said. "They have a further appreciation of other departments now, too," Mueller said. "They see the struggles of their colleagues and understand why they do some things the way they do."

Harms said that kind of cross-training can have an impact beyond the immediate project. Internal



"We talk about where you want to be, [and] how do you get there."



auditors don't necessarily have to come from a company's quality department. Production employees and people from other parts of the organization can be trained to participate.

Cross-training strengthens the company by giving employees new skills and exposure to different aspects of the business. Maintaining those quality systems can have a direct impact on an employee's personal growth as well as the company's growth.

"For example, if Xact Wire lost their certification, they could lose business," Harms said. "Which represents obviously lost revenue. Meanwhile, by sustaining those quality standards, it gives them opportunities to win new business and grow their business."

That capability matters for companies serving demanding markets, such as medical and defense industries.

But Xact's investment in people doesn't stop with its own employees.

BUILDING THE BOAT TOGETHER

The county's Manufacturing Pathways Consortium brings together more than 100 manufacturing companies, educational institutions, and four dozen community partners.

It is entirely volunteer-driven. No one pays to participate. No one gets paid to run it.

The consortium's five teams focus on Career Awareness and Discovery; Member Engagement, Talent Acquisition and Learning; Alternative Talent Pipeline; Marketing and Communications; and Governance and Steering.

Participants work to build a sustained talent pipeline by increasing awareness of manufacturing careers, developing technical and non-technical skills, encouraging collaborative hiring, and recognizing the value of nontraditional talent.

Mueller and Avient Corp. Tim Essington co-lead the consortium's Career Awareness and Discovery team. Every October, which is National Manufacturing Month, the duo organizes manufacturing tours for students throughout the county, working with companies and schools to arrange everything from small groups to tours of 50 students.

The objective is to let young people see what manufacturing actually looks like.

It also gives manufacturers an opportunity to show students and potential future employees what they make and what careers are available inside their facilities.

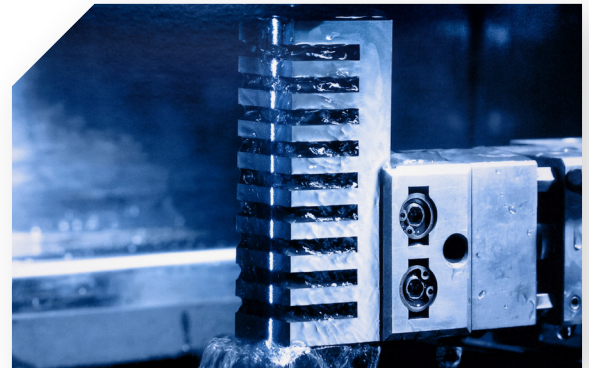
Sometimes, that means changing a student's perception of manufacturing. Sometimes, it means changing a parent's perception. And sometimes, it means simply opening a door.

XACT OPENS MORE THAN ONE DOOR

Xact hosts up to five high school interns each year through the consortium's internship program, which has placed more than 400 high school students through manufacturing internships over five years, of which 56 were eventually hired into full-time manufacturing careers, said Andrade.

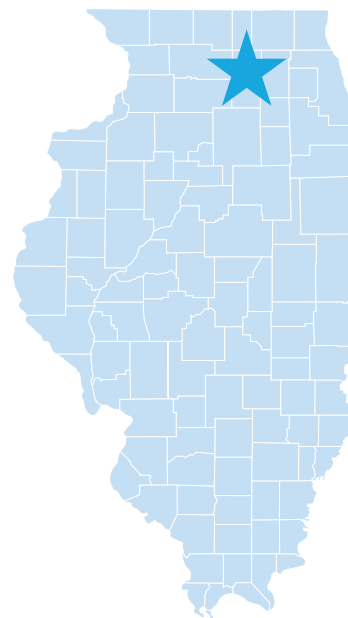


"They see the struggles of their colleagues and understand why they do some things the way they do."



XACT WIRE EDM CORPORATION

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The demand is there. Andrade said the most recent program received more than 186 applications but could place only about 80 students because there weren't enough manufacturers able to host.

A RISING TIDE

Manufacturers compete every day for customers, contracts, technology, and skilled employees.

But in McHenry County, a growing number of manufacturers recognize that some challenges are better addressed together.

Xact can benefit from a stronger manufacturing workforce, says Mueller. So can the company down the road. So can the students who discover manufacturing as a career and the families whose children find opportunities they might never otherwise have considered.

And so can the community. That is what makes the Manufacturing Pathways Consortium different.

It is about manufacturers sharing responsibility for the future workforce.

Xact's partnership with IMEC reflects the same philosophy. IMEC provided expertise to help Xact evaluate automation opportunities and strengthen its internal quality capabilities. Xact, in turn, is sharing its expertise, facilities and time with the broader manufacturing community.

The result is a cycle of investment. IMEC strengthens manufacturers; manufacturers strengthen the workforce; and a stronger workforce strengthens the manufacturing ecosystem.

That 17-year-old with the bicycle may never know how many people helped make his internship possible.

Ben may simply remember getting on a commuter train for a 13-mile trip, grabbing his bike, and riding to or from work.

But that ride represents what can happen when a community decides that a young person's opportunity is worth addressing.

And in McHenry County, manufacturers such as Xact Wire EDM are helping make sure there are more opportunities. It's one sure way to make more boats rise with the tide.

MADE IN MY HOMETOWN SERIES

In every Illinois hometown, manufacturing impacts families, community, state, and country – and IMEC is there. We're the first stop to taking small and midsize manufacturers from status quo to unstoppable. You bring the can-do spirit, we bring the know-how to scale your goals.

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"By sustaining those quality standards, it gives them opportunities to win new business and grow their business."



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