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Postcard from the AICPA Global Manufacturers Conference

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The Schneider Downs Manufacturing Industry Focus Group sent members to the AICPA Global Manufacturers Conference in mid-November. The three-day conference covered a variety of topics including an economic outlook, tax reform update, the Blockchain impact, accounting and regulatory matters, among several others. One of the more interesting sessions covered the manufacturing workforce and the challenges in finding skilled labor.

Spoiler alert – this session did not reveal the key to finding talent to a group of accountants. Nor did it suggest that the skilled labor shortage is no longer an issue and that there is now a strong pipeline of talent entering the workforce. Quite the opposite, in fact. However, Noel Ginsburg, the CEO of InterTech Plastics, based in Denver, Colorado, shared the relatively recent success of CareerWise Colorado (“CareerWise”), which established the first statewide youth apprenticeship program in the United States.

The CareerWise system was modeled after the apprenticeship system used in Switzerland. Switzerland’s academic curriculum for grades K-10 is similar in nature to the U.S. education system. However, the student’s work experience starts around age 15 and lasts two to four years as a hybrid structure of classroom education and vocational training. The CareerWise website notes that in Switzerland, there are over 230 apprenticeship occupations, with 40% of companies participating in the program. An astounding 70% of Swiss students choose apprenticeships, with 30% eventually working for the company they trained with.

To address the skilled labor shortage in the United States (specifically Colorado), Mr. Ginsburg teamed with politicians, business leaders and educators in Colorado who traveled to Switzerland to study the apprenticeship model and brought their learnings back to Colorado and began CareerWise. The CareerWise apprenticeship is a three-year program that provides students with the skills to enter the workforce upon completion if they choose not to pursue a higher education. Apprenticeships are offered in five areas, one of them being advanced manufacturing.

CareerWise offers students a paid apprenticeship and the opportunity to earn debt-free college credits. The CareerWise website lists approximately 75 companies that participate in the program, including recognizable names like Home Advisor, Otter Products and Janus Henderson. The CareerWise program is not intended to divert students away from pursuing a higher education. Rather, it is designed to provide students with opportunities to have a successful careers without a four-year degree while providing employers with a pipeline of talent.

Mr. Ginsburg mentioned that leaders from approximately 20 states have visited Colorado to learn about CareerWise in an effort to help employers fill the skills gap in their respective states. It will obviously take

time to implement these programs across the country, but the success CareerWise is having appears to be a good first step.

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