

**FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF ELLEN.ATKINSON@ADAHINC.COM**

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## How a Birmingham company is trying to connect local students with advanced manufacturing jobs

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An international business consultant wants to create a wider pipeline of talent from local high schools to logistics and advanced manufacturing companies.

Adah International, led by [Kirk Atkinson](#), is looking to expand its efforts to fill labor needs for advanced manufacturers in the state for positions such as machine operators, maintenance technicians and logistics workers.

Advanced manufacturers in Birmingham and around the state have regularly told the Birmingham Business Journal that they face challenges finding the skilled workers to meet their labor needs. It's a problem many believe will become an increasing challenge as baby boomers retire.

The company set up a logistics training program six years ago for students who were either unable or unwilling to go to college. The students take logistics theory courses at high school and receive job training at a nearby logistics or manufacturing company. More than 20 students step off the graduation stage and into a job or associate's degree program every year.

Now, Atkinson said the program is looking for buy-in from area companies or nonprofits to expand the program.

"Maybe we need a little bit of philanthropy in the beginning to get it started up," said Atkinson. "And then we can get our first group of students out the first year. Then, I know the companies will buy in. And of course, when you have five, six companies buying in, the costs get even cheaper, and of course, the companies hire the students."

He said Adah is open to the idea of setting up a nonprofit, but would prefer to secure funding through established nonprofits or work with them at or near cost.

Adah would recruit companies and students, and set up the curricula.

He said the initiative would provide a service to lean manufacturing companies that do not have the human resource staffs to set up a program like this, and to schools that do not have the experience to



In Adah's program, more than 20 students a year graduate with a job in logistics waiting for them.

meet advanced manufacturers' needs.

Recently, Adah set up a mechatronics apprenticeship program for a prominent manufacturing company and Birmingham community college in which successful applicants receive instruction in the classroom and training on the floor for three years. Twenty students are paid for their work while in school, and upon graduation, receive an associate's degree, technical certifications, and competitive salaries.

Atkinson said Adah wants to set up a machine operator program, which would be a precursor to the mechatronics apprenticeship. It would be similar to its ongoing logistics program, providing instruction and training for students and producing 20 machine operators or apprentices a year.

"It's zero debt for the kids," said Atkinson. "We heard from the kids and from parents and teachers — there's that drop off point before graduation senior year. They just need an opportunity before them to say, 'From the day I graduate, I go from the school that I've been at and the company that I've already been at for a year or two, and I'm just going from less school to more company, that's it. And I'm also making damn good money.'"

**Hanno van der Bijl**

Digital producer

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