



## TEK PAK: INVESTMENT IN EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT IS THE BEST PATHWAY TO MANUFACTURERS' SUCCESS

The growing skills gap and ongoing worker shortage has increased the need for manufacturers to evolve their approach to workforce issues. Just as the industry has evolved over the years with advancements in technology and automation, so have the needs of employers and the employees they're trying to attract to their shop room floors. Collectively, the manufacturing industry will be best served by taking a holistic approach that not only includes making investments in training our workers to operate our equipment, but also investing in their development as people. At the end of the day, investment in employee development is the best pathway to manufacturers' success.

Tek Pak is a mid-sized manufacturer providing innovative flexible packaging solutions for a variety of customers in the healthcare, food, industrial, and electronics sectors who are competitive in both the domestic and the global marketplace. Founded in 1992, shortly after one of the partners built a specialized electronics packaging known as carrier tape in his home garage, Tek Pak made Batavia, IL its home and is still operating out of its first facility today. Tek Pak has since expanded, and currently employs approximately 100 workers across four locations in the Kane County area; most employees have been with the company for more than twenty years. Roughly half of Tek Pak's workforce is Hispanic, and their human resources department is bilingual. Many of the positions at Tek Pak are highly skilled jobs and require the capability to navigate instruments and machining operations specific to the plastics and thermoform industry.

The processes and equipment manufacturers rely on often require additional tailored upskilling and training. Because of this, Tek Pak provides research and development services to their customers on a project basis for cutting edge applications. "We work with customers from the early conceptual stages to product launch as we engage in the commercial manufacturing of their product," said Wendy White Eagle, Director of Finance and Shared Services at Tek Pak. "For example, many projects require the use of a Kiefel machine for development, production, and processing of plastic films. Customers

come to us with a specific issue they're trying to solve, and our team turns the concept to production-ready parts in record time. To do this, we need a team trained to recalibrate machines, create new and tailored molds, and skilled enough to help move products through each stage of the process."

Well-practiced and proficiently trained workers are in high demand as technological advancements are rapidly introduced across the industry and international competition increases. In truth, it is rare to find someone walking in the door who has the specific skillsets needed to jump into these roles, and even standard certifications in machine tooling are often not a perfect fit for Tek Pak's niche industry.

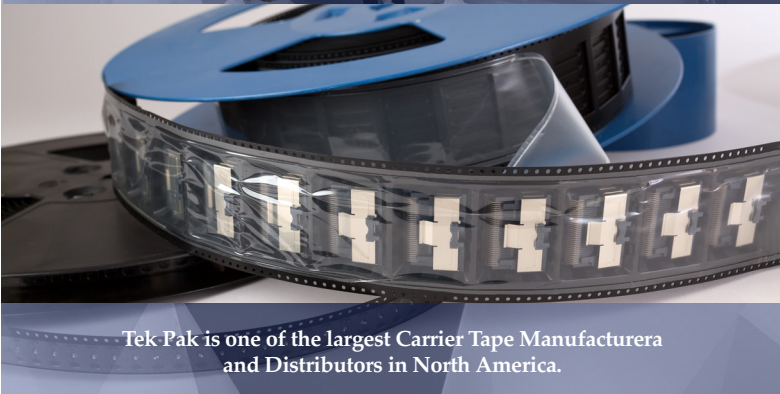
So, how do manufacturers like Tek Pak recruit and build a pipeline of workers in a sustainable way and grow production capabilities at the same time? Just as Tek Pak must routinely think outside of the box to find solutions for their customers, manufacturers must think outside of the box and look at things holistically when considering their unique workforce challenges. After all, manufactures are innovators, it's what they are known for.

Tek Pak began by merely exploring the idea of growing their own internal employee development program specific to their machinery and applications surrounding their operations. "Culling our ideas and development first began in 2015, and we're excited to be rolling it out officially for our employees in the first half of 2022," said White Eagle. "While it took some time to fine-tune, we expect the program to be well worth our investment as we see employees continue to thrive and production levels increase."

While there are great training and apprenticeship programs out there for CNC Operators, maintenance technicians, and many of the standard positions available in the industry, Tek Pak struggled to find something that was well aligned with plastics, and more specifically, thermoforming. With the overall goal of providing a training program to their specialized arena, the company had to back track, starting with principals of thermoforming and specific tools and equipment used in their niche sector. "Many programs provide great classroom



Thermoform Machine being Programmed by Tek Pak team member for custom packaging solutions



Tek Pak is one of the largest Carrier Tape Manufacturer and Distributors in North America.



Wendy K. White Eagle, Director of Finance and Shared Services for Tek Pak, Inc.

training, but we wanted to find a way to combine that learning with hands on application to the machines we have on our shop room floor," said White Eagle. "This aligns with the specific product solutions we've developed for customers right here with our engineering team at Tek Pak."

Like many of their peers, Tek Pak works with a hiring service to help find candidates to join their workforce. Key factors they evaluate in potential candidates are fit in company culture and energy and openness – attitude is key. "Typically, we bring in someone to start in assembly or serving as a machine tender, monitoring a piece of equipment to ensure it is running smoothly and flagging any issues for a skilled technician if there is a disruption of service," said White Eagle. During this time, senior team members can watch their progress and assess their abilities. If things go well, managers at Tek Pak have been able to elevate their career path by providing additional training on equipment and other operations. "Seeing the success of this initial process is what gave root to the idea of creating a structured program to help grow our internal talent pipeline," said White Eagle. Through Tek Pak's program, employees start as a production assistant. From there, they move into a production apprenticeship role and train on a specific piece of equipment, learning to not only operate the machine but also how to adjust programming, assess and make adjustments based on a customer's requirements, and move the product through development, safety protocols, and inspection.

Pairing a production assistant apprentice with a senior member of the Tek Pak team provides an integrated hands-on learning experience allowing them ask questions, receive real-time instruction, and develop the skillset needed to eventually operate the machine on their own. "We're also pairing outside virtual classroom instruction along with inside learning and testing," said White Eagle. In order to get certified on a piece of Tek Pak equipment, employees must pass foundational classroom instruction, meet quality and safety measurement skills, and ultimately, take an order from beginning to end. Throughout the process, they are also developing important

life skills including teamwork, time management and most importantly, recognizing their personal value. "When an employer values a worker's contribution and invests in their growth, it leads to amazing transformations," White Eagle expanded, "Employees suddenly begin to recognize their own skills and self-worth. Further, the more success they have in learning how to manage multiple pieces of equipment and operational functions, growth options are created for them to move up in the company."

Tek Pak currently has 15-16 different types of machinery that employees can be apprenticed on, and they increase their earning potential as additional certifications are achieved. "As we navigate the ongoing pandemic, this approach to cross-training has been increasingly important," said White Eagle. "Having multiple people training on multiple machines has been a great asset in covering bases to keep us up and running during challenging times." The more machines and processes a worker can be trained on, the greater production efficiency. Through this model, Tek Pak has begun building a workforce that has been cross-trained to step in when someone is out, and that has made a pivotal impact in day to day operations at the company.

While taking the time to set up an internal training program that requires additional investment as the industry continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic may not feel like a top priority, it is something all manufacturers should consider. Tek Pak's experience shows that by investing in their best asset—their employees—companies can greater production, company growth, and an overall motivated and appreciative workforce. "As Director of Finance and Shared Services for Tek Pak, I have seen first-hand how our workers' demeanor and outlook can change when someone takes the time to invest in their personal development," said White Eagle. "By broadly sharing best practices we endeavour to build not only our employee base, but also the manufacturing sector where we have the privilege to serve." ♦