

Auto Engineers Look Outside Industry For Work

David Runk, Associated Press Writer

DETROIT (AP) — After Jerry Tester lost his job as a contract engineer at General Motors, it soon became clear that the struggling auto industry wouldn't be the place where he would work again.

The 45-year-old spent months unemployed before a tip from a friend led him to the Talascend Global Training Academy, where he took a crash course in piping design that landed him a job at Marathon Oil Corp.'s refinery in Detroit.

For Tester, his nearly 20 years of auto experience gave him the foundation to switch to the oil and gas industry.

"We already have the mindset and abilities to think along design engineering lines," he said.

Years of downsizing in the U.S. auto industry have left behind a pool of engineers and designers looking for work. Some seek training in plug-in hybrid electrics and cutting-edge vehicle safety systems, while others are turning to retraining programs like Talascend's to reach beyond the auto industry for a new line of work.

The academy was started in February by Talascend LLC, a staffing company that partnered with Macomb Community College, which has a history of teaching computer-aided design for the auto industry. Of the roughly 50 people trained in six-week sessions, the first two — including Tester — recently got jobs.

"The people who have gone through the training programs early are recognizers of the fact that, while they might get pulled back into the auto industry, they might not," said Jim Sawyer, vice provost of career programs at Macomb Community College. "If they do, it will be on a project basis with no security."

It's that future, Tester said, that led him to Marathon Oil. Between auto industry jobs and five years on active duty with the Michigan National Guard, Tester had never been without a job. But after 10 years of working at GM in the Detroit suburb of Warren, he couldn't find new work in the auto industry.

He describes the Talascend program as "high-intensity": six 40-hour weeks at the college. The idea was to give him enough training that, coupled with his engineering background, would be the equivalent of 5 years' experience in piping design.

The training costs \$7,500, with \$5,000 picked up by a state program and the rest paid by graduates after they get a job. The financial commitment helps ease potential employers' worries about whether the engineers and designers are committed to a career change. Talascend subsidizes additional costs.

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Tester's training wrapped up in May, and last month he landed a job. Companies can hire graduates directly or as contract employees through Talascend. In Tester's case, he's working for Marathon Oil as a senior designer with Talascend. Without the training, he said: "They wouldn't have even looked at us."

Other graduates have been getting job interviews. Jason Dawson, the academy's president, said his company in recent years had found unmet demand for engineers and designers in the oil and gas industry. Seeing more engineers and designers from the auto industry on the job market led to the creation of the academy, he said.

"We have a tremendous wealth of design and engineering experience in the Detroit market," Dawson said.

The effect of years of cuts by the Detroit Three automakers and their suppliers is difficult to quantify in terms of engineering jobs lost, since companies consider details competitive information. But the bottom line is that companies are trying to do more with fewer engineers.

Automakers have moved to more global product platforms, with one design team working on a specific vehicle instead of one team for each region of the world, said Lindsay Brooke, senior editor of Automotive Engineering International magazine, which is published by the Society of Automotive Engineers. Computer tools, he noted, also have increased what individual engineers can do.

"A big hit in autos has been on the manufacturing side," Brooke said. "Any engineer involved in tooling, processes in the plant, product to be manufactured. ... When a plant closes, much of what is related to the plant is reduced."

While the initial sessions focused on piping design, Talascend plans to expand its retraining programs into other areas of mechanical and civil engineering. It's already partnered with software providers and is looking to offer programs tailored for the nuclear and alternative and energy industries.

"The automotive market isn't there to go back to," Dawson said. "What was there isn't going to exist anymore."

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