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Racine — Ahmad Hattix looks preoccupied as he is about to be relaunched.

It could be because he has spectators — his father, his fiancée, young children bouncing around in a hallway at Gateway Technical College in Racine, where he's about to graduate. Maybe he's just eager to get moving.

Which happens. People assemble around tables, officials speak, men come up to receive certificates. Hattix, now smiling, makes several trips, as he has not only graduated but has earned some other honors. He is a changed man.

Hattix has been changed by technical education, by Gateway's "**boot camp**" in the sort of high-end computerized metalworking called **CNC** machining. Hattix, 31, of Racine has a prison record and practically no job experience. But thanks to the **boot camp**, he has bright prospects. As of his graduation July 18, he already has a job offer in Kenosha.

"I'm going to go down there and see what they're talking about," he said, though he also has hopes for work with a Sturtevant company, Poclain Hydraulics, that has hired previous **boot camp** graduates. A company representative had come to talk to the class. It sounded like a good place to work, he told me at the time, with nice benefits: "I've got a family to support."

Indeed: Hattix was due to be married about the time this story rolled off the presses, a formal commitment to a woman to whom he'd already committed ink — her name, Edwina, was tattooed on his neck. They have a child on the way. He has obligations. Now he has the means to fulfill them.

Changes in Wisconsin's manufacturing economy have often meant ill news for men such as Hattix — those with poor educations, few skills or prison records. Perennial unemployment in cities has led some to suggest there's something awry with the economy that demands a massive reordering at the hand of the state.

But the experience of Hattix and nine other new machinists suggests a more modest and feasible path: Help workers change.

Hard skills, soft skills

Hattix was one of 10 men graduating from the **boot camp**, the eighth such session. The program is a joint effort of Gateway and the Racine County Workforce Development Center, a quasi-government agency.

The **boot camp** lasts 14 weeks. In it, eight hours a day, five days a week, students who may never have so much as seen a factory are trained in how to understand computerized lathes, drills and mills that now predominate in the region's machine shops. They learn academics — chiefly math and quality control — and they learn how to run the machines and how to set them to rights when they're not working as they should. They are brought to the point where a manufacturer can hire them, ready for on-the-job training.

That's the part Gateway teaches. What distinguishes the **boot camp** is that it also explicitly teaches soft skills, the habits that make one employable. This is the specialty of the Workforce Development Center, specifically of Melissa Hennessy. Her job amounts to being a kind of life skills coach, maybe a bit of social worker.

She helps **boot** campers learn things that some know and others don't: how to make and keep appointments, how to be on a team, how to have a boss, how to show due respect to the boss. A huge one: how to be on time. Students are judged, when applying, on whether they're on time. In the **camp**, if they aren't on time, they can be fired. Each graduate was given, as a parting gift, a handsome travel alarm clock.

Hennessy, who shows up at the **boot camp** every day, keeps coaching students as long as a year afterward. The **boot** campers face many competing demands, and they're responsible for handling them. "I act as a prompter," she said.

"It sounds kind of remedial, but some of the people we get have never had to go through that process," said machining instructor Craig Maeschen.

This seems to work. Employers rave about the program and snap up the grads. In the previous class, all 12 Racine County participants found work as **CNC** machinists. Overall, about 90% of **boot camp** grads have been hired as machinists. About 85% of the students graduate.

But what about the students? What is it like to go from a standstill to work-ready in a technical field in 70 days — and, perhaps, to be told that you must change your attitude or learn punctuality?

It's difficult, say students.

It's difficult, for one thing, simply to go back to school. Thomas Kuhagen, 21, said he was pretty much out of school by 15 after he'd taken up drinking in middle school: "I never did that good with school."

He's been working since his mid-teens, often in retail. He'd spent the past few years managing a dollar store, something he didn't want to do all his life. He's hoping to find work that pays benefits, something on which he can support his 9-month-old daughter and her mother, his girlfriend. His grandfather had worked for tractor maker J.I. Case, and his stepfather encouraged him to seek industrial work.

He enjoys metalworking: "You cut metal for cars, trucks, the Air Force," he said.

"I could do this until I retire."

But first, he had to return to school. The rough patch came about halfway through, when the math class hit trigonometry. He had never made it as far as algebra.

"At first, I thought I wouldn't be able to do this at all," he said.

He managed. He showed up an hour early for some quiet study time. He studied four to five hours a night. His girlfriend, who lives with him at his parents' house, made flash cards and drilled him after the baby was put to bed.

"I got lots of family support," he said.

Dave Lindas also found it tough to return to school, mainly because, at 48, he'd been out of it so long. As far as soft skills, he had all the habits of reliability that employers want — he'd been working for years at a grocery warehouse in Sturtevant, where he lives. What jarred him were the intellectual demands, especially the trigonometry. He says he was a slacker in high school, taking only what he termed "calculator math."

"Bottom line is, I didn't learn much," he said. And while he took some shop classes, the machines now look radically different — they're run by computer panels that Lindas had to learn to program. "This is a whole different ball of wax," he said.

"Me being an older fellow, I wouldn't consider myself in the computer generation," he said. He's mechanically inclined, but "it's not like you just grab a wrench and start moving stuff around."

Lindas told me during the early weeks of class that he was doing quite a bit of personal juggling: He's the single father of a 15-year-old daughter, and he had to fit his homework around taking her to her dance classes and baseball games. He was still looking pressurized by the ninth week, when the **boot campers** were moving out of classroom work and into the machining lab, setting real tools to real metal or, as Lindas was doing one particular day, running programs they'd written on a simulator.

Step by step, Lindas was working out the kinks. He and a classmate figured out the dense syntax of the machines' control language — semicolon here, a different X value there — so that the simulated curving cut ended where it should.

It was hard, said Lindas, but he had no regrets: "I've been stuck in the same mode down at the warehouse there. This sort of gets the brain moving again."

For Hattix, it is a matter of getting his life moving. He did not have a promising start to adulthood. He has a high school equivalency degree — from the Ethan Allen School in Wales. His main work experience was doing maintenance for six years while incarcerated at the state prison in Waupun.

With the **boot camp**, he had to learn to get himself there on time, daily, starting with the application process before he got in. It was a big adjustment. "I wasn't used to nobody expecting anything from me," he said.

Hattix said that what drew him to the program was the promise of work. So many job opportunities seemed to require some kind of training, especially jobs in manufacturing.

"I ain't never been in no shop. I barely went to school," he said when I talked to him at the start of the **camp**. But he was willing to give it a try.

Especially since it could help employers see past his past. Steve Newell, who supervises the machine shop at Poclair Hydraulics, said his company certainly doesn't consider a prison record a bar to employment if an ex-convict seems to have straightened out his life. "You paid for your past," is how he sees it, and the company has hired men with criminal backgrounds who have gone on to be successful machinists. Many, he said, are grateful for the opportunity. Other employers say they take a similar view.

Hattix said the companies he's talked with have done that. He told them why he'd been in prison — it was a violent offense — and they replied it wasn't an issue as long as he'd changed. One specifically said Hattix's passing the **boot camp** was a sign of that.

"That took a lot off my mind," he said.

Increased demand

One reason employers will take a chance is because they're desperate. One graduation speaker noted that, that morning, 83 employers in the seven-county metro Milwaukee area were looking for **CNC** machinists. Because of a scheduling quirk, only two employers showed up at the graduation, ready to interview afterward, said the Workforce Center's Hennessy. Usually, there have been more.

"The demand is there," she said, which is driving Gateway to start another **boot camp** on Sept. 2, a fast turnaround. The bottleneck is getting students to give it a try.

It's a problem all over manufacturing and beyond, said Jennifer McNelly, who heads work force and education research at the Manufacturing Institute, a think tank run by the National Association of Manufacturers. Eighty percent of manufacturers say they can't find enough skilled workers, she said — but huge numbers also say they can't even get unskilled labor and that the skills would-be workers lack often include basic math and reading.

Part of the problem is that fewer young people think of manufacturing as a career, she said. It's good work — most **boot camp** grads start at \$10 to \$12 an hour, and manufacturers are requiring more intelligence and skill from employees than before. Most manufacturing jobs now require at least some post-high-school training or schooling, yet too many potential employees are dropping out of high school. "People don't even have the basics today," McNelly said.

Nor does manufacturing just involve repetitive tasks, said Maeschen, the machining instructor. Employers need people who can adapt, take initiative, learn new things. "They're expecting the operators to do more than put in a part and push a button," he said.

Employees have to work on teams, for instance. Typically, when companies institute so-called lean production techniques, they reorganize workers into teams and must give them training in group dynamics, in how to deal with conflict.

Gateway's **boot camp** builds such lessons into its curriculum. The campers are organized into teams of three or four, and they are judged not just on their individual performances but that of their team as well. It means they have to learn to look out for each other, to notice who needs help.

So, as graduation neared, Hattix, Kuhagen and Joaquin Ynocencio were helping each other in the shop figure out how Maeschen had deliberately fiddled with the settings on a lathe, while Lindas and some other students were checking each others' work with micrometers. "We do a good job keeping each other in focus," Hattix said.

But still more basic, said McNelly, employers want workers who will show up. It's "a consistent challenge."

Newell, who is careful to praise the local work force, said turnover at Poclairn Hydraulics isn't a result of people making bad parts. "I'm having turnover in my company because of attendance," he said.

Kuhagen, the student, noted that when he was running a store, getting workers to consistently come to work was a headache. "I just don't see why people don't make it to work."

The **boot camp** graduates make it. You don't pass if you don't show up all the time. One student was "terminated," as the program terms it, because he decided not to come one day. Hennessy, who followed up with the student, said it might have been excusable if he'd called or warned her.

"He felt terrible," she said. "But feeling terrible doesn't get the job done."

Hennessy and her boss, Mark Mundl, who has to do the firing, aren't cold about it. Lindas said he was surprised at how helpful they were toward students who needed flexibility. "They really want to see you get into a job," he said.

But a part of teaching soft skills is making hard demands. Students have to find it in themselves to meet the standards, Maeschen said. "If they can't do it with us, there's no way on God's green earth they're going to be able to do it with an employer."

Sammis White, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor who studies labor force issues, said that more job programs are working soft skills into their training. "The lesson is sinking in," he said.

"It's definitely a trend," said Linda Stewart, interim director of operations for the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board. Employers are asking for it, so her agency has incorporated lessons about punctuality and attitude into its youth jobs programs and its retraining for ex-convicts. "We find people are very receptive," she said.

Other programs are incorporating some of the more advanced soft skills, such as teamwork or adaptability. A program run by Milwaukee's HIRE Center and the Milwaukee Area Technical College offers certification in such new manufacturing skills to older displaced workers. The Gateway program, too, offered such a certification in things like problem solving, safety techniques and taking criticism well, and some of the graduates earned it.

The graduates aren't perfect. "I kind of fell on my face," Lindas said of a practice job interview in which he was asked about the popular quality-control program Six Sigma. "I just got tongue-tied," he said, though Six Sigma actually does mean something to him. It didn't 14 weeks earlier.

But Lindas has a gold-standard signal to employers that he's a good hire. He was given a chance to upgrade his skills, and he took it.

Replicable change

This is a critical thing to keep in mind as Wisconsin discusses its changing economy. It is an old story that manufacturing isn't what it once was, a plentiful supplier of high-paying jobs to those with little education. The story that's only now emerging is that it remains a solid supplier of high-paying jobs — manufacturing output in Wisconsin generally has risen for the past three decades even as employment has fallen — but the jobs go to those who are willing to adapt to a much higher set of demands.

This emerging story inverts the popular belief that there's something permanently wrong with manufacturing or, perhaps, with the entire economy, so wrong that great numbers of people simply can't ever expect decent work. Such a belief leads either to schemes to rewrite economic rules or to a despair that, without massive intervention by the state, the future is hopeless.

The future is not hopeless either at the macro level or for individuals. People who want better work can adapt, which is a lot more likely and feasible than changing everything else to accommodate them.

Not that this means they're on their own. Gateway's success shows that if public policy has a role, it is to create opportunities for people to change.

"We firmly believe there are lots of good programs out there," said McNelly, who before working for the Manufacturing Institute oversaw job training innovation for the U.S. Department of Labor. She said the Gateway program is "magnificent" and worth duplicating. "It's not about more money," she said. "It's about properly using the resources we have and getting them aligned."

The **boot camp** is replicable, Mundl and Hennessy said. It isn't expensive. The program, which is free to the participants, costs about \$2,500 a student, covered by state job-training grants. That doesn't include Hennessy's salary for the third of her hours she spends on the program, but the soft skills component doesn't require an army of social workers, either. What it needs, she said, is buy-in and cooperation from work force agencies and tech colleges and a willingness to place demands on people.

People can change and often want to. Kuhagen said the birth of his daughter finally moved him to seek something better than managing a dollar store. He talks of finding work in Platteville, "a nice small town to raise my daughter," where her mother can pursue her dream of studying nursing. He wants to be the kind of father who can provide. "I want to be able to take her on vacations, take her to Disney World."

As for Hattix, "I'm very proud of him," said his father, Hugh Hattix, who himself learned machining 30 years ago at Gateway. "I'm so glad he stayed focused."

At the start of the class, Ahmad Hattix said he already felt he had accomplished something, just making it in. As the **camp** was nearing its end, even as he was practicing for the final tests, he was eager to move on. Visits from potential employers excited him.

"It's get a job, keep a job," he said. "Hopefully, I'll be able to work my way up the ladder."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

The next Gateway machining **boot camp** starts Sept. 2. Students must apply for it by Aug. 6.

Prospective students should apply through county work force agencies. In Racine County, call (262) 638-6527; in Kenosha County, call (262) 697-4505. In Milwaukee County, call the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board at (414) 270-7529 to take part in the Gateway program or other training opportunities.

Cost: The program, meant for dislocated workers or those with low incomes or challenges to finding work, is usually free to those accepted.

Employers looking to learn more about hiring graduates can call Mark Mundl at (262) 638-6621.

AT JSONLINE

See more of Peter Holderness' images of the students in the shop, as well as an interview with student Joaquin Ynocencio, at www.jsonline.com/links.

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