

Michael Hissam: Wanted on border: tecnicos

By Michael Hissam / Guest columnist

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In the maquiladora world, much as with U.S. industry, it is easy to equate "work force" with "blue collar" or production operators, and "management" as just about everybody else between shop floor and corner office.

It just doesn't work that way. In fact "keeping the shop running" depends very much on tecnicos or skilled trades people. Think electricistas, plomeros, carpinteros; no translation needed for these cognates. Hay mas; there are more.

Job opportunities for tecnicos happen to be hot right now -- so hot that Chihuahua education officials joined with El Paso's Network of Mexican Talents group to sign an agreement to better prepare the next cadre of technicians. Many potential students for the programs are now 14 or 15 years old.

Signed earlier this week at the Mexican Consulate in El Paso, this accord with CONALEP (acronym for Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica) calls for the 175-strong El Paso group to provide knowledge for the up-and-coming trades people, said Dr. Alberto Correa, who heads the network in El Paso.

"CONALEP is a national institution in charge of developing human capital for technicians," Correa said. "We are trying to support this educational institution in the state of Chihuahua. We want to provide technology, research and development. This would come by way of a series of programs for informational exchange to keep updating the type of education needed in Mexico."

He added that many of his network's members work in the maquiladoras, forging strong relationships with American and other companies. "We also hope to work with American universities and some national laboratories."

CONALEP began nearly 30 years ago to offer students a competency-based academic model so they could develop as middle-level technicians with skills needed for national or international companies or institutions.

Jose Luis Armendariz, president of AMAC, the maquiladora association in Juárez, looked toward immediate benefits from the accord.

"Results from this will start today. The most important thing is how we can work together. This agreement is most important to us. The first step is working with the Mexican talents here in the U.S., and then with

the educational institutions in Mexico. From there, we work with industry. No question about it, this is working together to be the best."

Armendariz pointed out that initial educational programs aim to support the wiring harness industry, one of the larger ones in Juárez. "We are working with them, including a Chinese company and a Japanese-Canadian joint venture. This will give us an opportunity for the renewed culture of design, innovation and the new products for the future."

Xochitl Diaz, network and AMAC board member and lead person for the upcoming Human Capital Day at Juárez Competitiva, saw the tie between this week's signing and the upcoming Competitiva event.

"This is part of what Human Capital Day of Juárez Competitiva is all about. We need to bring over more knowledge and technology, and that is what human capital is all about. That is an area that we need to increase," she added.

Based in Juárez, but having recently visited other labor markets, Diaz said, "Right now many people want to get a university degree. However there are many more jobs for tecnicos, what you would call skilled trades."

Dr. Carlos Ochoa, associated with CONALEP and former president of the Autonomous University of Chihuahua, told signatories that for every engineer hired there is the need for as many as 20 tecnicos to support that engineer's work.

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