



## Innovator Interview: Christian Cowan

### Polaris Manufacturing Extension Partnership, Center Director

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Christian Cowan is the center director for Polaris Manufacturing Extension Partnership, which helps provides business improvement programs to manufacturers in Rhode Island. He spoke with the GPL about his work with Rhode Island's workforce development program and implementing active contract management.

*This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

#### *What types of support do the manufacturers you work with most need?*

**Christian Cowan:** So some small companies need help with sales and marketing. A lot of companies need help with their operations, meaning lean manufacturing, quality systems, facility layout—things that they need to help their business run efficiently. But the most requested tool right now revolves around workforce. It's both finding new hires for open positions and training their existing workforce.

As there's been a transformation for manufacturing here in Rhode Island, the skills required to complete the jobs on a manufacturing work floor have evolved. However, it takes a long time for the systems that are in place, both federally and at a state level, to change with them. So the role that Polaris fills is connecting those fast-changing requirements on a manufacturing floor with the programs that help train new and existing employees in a manufacturing environment.

There are different types of manufacturers in the state of Rhode Island. There are very high-precision metal machine manufacturers, there are marine composite manufacturers, and there are textile manufacturers. They all have slightly different needs in terms of workforce and technical capabilities. So we work to convene a lot of those different groups together, understand what their hiring needs are, and get the data together to get people connected with the training programs that they need to excel in a working environment.

#### *Tell us about Rhode Island's workforce development program*

The historical way of training and way educational institutions handled workforce, especially on a manufacturing floor, have proven not to work. Real Jobs Rhode Island has really turned that model on its head and starts with the employers' needs in terms of skills and open positions. Then we, as a network, as a partnership, really put together the trainers and the people required to plug workers into those open holes. The ability of the program to put employers' needs first makes it dynamic in terms of how the program evolves.

Real Jobs is probably one of the most dynamic workforce programs—I work with Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) centers around the country, and several other MEP national staff have said it's probably the most dynamic workforce program in the country right now. It is a program that has enabled manufacturers to do training programs and hire new employees like none that I've ever seen. It gives Polaris the ability to come up with programs

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based on current employer needs, find people, train them up, and get them hired very quickly. The program provides an incredible resource in meeting what employers need right now for their workforce.

### ***Tell us about working with the GPL and the state on implementing Active Contract Management***

Historically, there have been many training programs that latch onto very specific stories about an individual or a program, not necessarily serving the needs of the community that they're supposed to be serving. There have been many examples of even the media taking some stories and potentially making something bigger than it is. In the past, Polaris has focused on a very small number of anecdotes from one or two employers and launched programs training for those specific employers, assuming that it was serving a larger need.

Now, data-driven management and Active Contract Management provide Polaris and our partnership with the ability to dive into the data and understand how we're executing our programs. We can look at many different data points, take that bigger picture, and launch programs that solve the problem for a larger set of unemployed and underemployed people and serve the broader needs of the manufacturing community, all by looking at the programs from a data analysis standpoint rather than just anecdotally. We also understand what we need to do to make sure that our programs continue to improve and address the needs of the employers.

Sometimes we sit in these partnership meetings with the Active Contract Management data, and there's some data that surprises us, so we talk through it as a group. It gives the group the ability to dive into that number and to understand where we need to step up the performance in terms of placing people with employers or even the number of employers that are engaged. We can understand what the data results are and respond very quickly in terms of providing the right resources to employers.

### ***Is there anything else you'd like to add?***

There have been many people who have been down on manufacturing in the last 20 years, especially here in the State of Rhode Island. We're lucky enough to have a governor who is very supportive of manufacturing and technology, so there are a lot of growth areas for manufacturing in the state. From my point of view, success really circles around the employers. There continue to be employers with open positions. There continue to be employers that need skills that they don't have in their company today. So we constantly look at metrics in terms of placements, but we also look at metrics in terms of how the skills match up with employers and what their business needs are.

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