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## Robots can't do everything: manufacturers want Surry students

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Oct 9, 2025



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Students get up close with manufacturing materials at the United Plastics booth during Manufacturing Week, discovering how local companies turn raw materials into finished products.


Ryan Kelly | The News

When Alex Harris shook hands with a Shenandoah Furniture representative at Wednesday's Manufacturing Week Student Career Fair, he didn't realize he was demonstrating one of the skills local employers say they need most.

The North Surry High School student said he was simply showing respect. "I just think it's common manners, to respect people," he said.

Apparently a handshake can mean a lot more. The Shenandoah employee staffing the booth said Harris made an impression on him — his was only the third handshake he had received that day, with the job fair nearing its conclusion.





An estimated 305 students from across Surry County's four school systems gathered Oct. 8 at the Surry Community College gymnasium for the culminating event of Manufacturing Week, an initiative designed to expose young people to career opportunities in local industry.

Catrina Alexander, industry initiatives director with the Surry County Economic Development Partnership, said organizers encouraged participating companies to make their booths as interactive as possible. She also noted the importance of soft skills — abilities such as communication and interpersonal interaction that employers increasingly value.

Companies from around the area participated in the career fair, representing a diverse cross-section of Surry County's industrial landscape. The list included major employers such as AES, Altec, Cardinal CT Glass, Interlam, Johnson Granite, Ottenweller, Shenandoah Furniture, SouthData, United Plastics, Wayne-Sanderson Farms and Weyerhaeuser, as well as smaller manufacturers like Brown and Church, a necktie producer. Surry Community College, NC Works and Surry-Yadkin Works also had booths.

For Curtis Burton of United Plastics, the level of student interest was surprising — and encouraging.

"I grew up in the era where you were taught if you don't have a four-year degree that you're not going to make it or you're not going to succeed," Burton said. "Well, I think the message has been passed back down to the generations that these trades are absolutely valuable for us. We need people that can work with their hands and use their intelligence. Computers and robots can't do all this stuff."

He said someone has to fix the machines and the robots when they break. "We need mechanics, we need machine operators, we need human resources," he said. "We're a manufacturing plant, we have each and every one of those roles and a need for every one of those."

Burton said United Plastics is hiring mechanics and machine operators.

"I would say the trades are just as valuable, if not more valuable, in today's society because there is a higher demand for those things," he said.

The companies at the fair represented more than traditional factory floor work. SouthData showcases customer communications management and document services. AES specializes in industrial electronics and equipment repair. Cardinal CT Glass produces advanced glass coatings and energy-efficient products. Wayne-Sanderson Farms, a major poultry production facility in Dobson, represented the food processing sector.

At Johnson Granite's booth, students answered trivia questions. Interlam displayed samples of manufactured wood products. United Plastics demonstrated the components of their extrusion process, showing students how plastic pellets are melted and formed into various shapes.

For some students, Manufacturing Week offered a chance to consider alternatives to their primary career goals.

Lillian Carson, a North Surry High School student, said she has known since eighth grade that she wants to pursue criminal justice and become a lawyer. She's considering Appalachian State or the University of Illinois.

However, during the career fair, Carson said she's also been looking into welding as a potential backup plan.

"Yeah. That's one of those big money ones. Yes, sir," she said when the earning potential was mentioned.

Harris, who extended that memorable handshake at the Shenandoah booth, said he was interested in HVAC and carpentry after touring the fair. He said he could see himself pursuing HVAC as a career.

Student groups also toured Surry Community College facilities including welding, electrical systems, construction and carpentry programs, gaining hands-on exposure to the training pathways available locally.

Manufacturing Week included factory tours at area manufacturers and a leadership breakfast celebrating National Manufacturing Day. The student career fair represented the final component of the week's activities, designed to connect the next generation of workers with opportunities in Surry County's manufacturing sector.

It is a stated goal of local leaders in business and education to retain local talent after graduation. By showing students that there are options across the county in manufacturing and in support roles behind the scenes, organizers aim to challenge the assumption that career success requires leaving the area.

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