In South Carolina, high school students choose to major in one of 16 clusters of study. One of those clusters is manufacturing and only 2% of students choose manufacturing as a career in their education plan. That’s a problem, since manufacturing accounts for 9% of projected job openings in the next decade. This disparity in South Carolina probably holds true for the rest of the country. Manufacturing has outstanding career opportunities for our students as they complete high school and college. Manufacturing companies across the US will need to actively engage with students and find those who fit the new high-tech, high-skill profile to build its workforce of the future. Total Comfort Solutions crafted a strategy that tapped into students, and has allowed this mechanical service company to grow its own workforce.

Ten years ago, our company’s growth was stymied by a shortage of HVAC service technicians. Total Comfort Solutions was expanding its base of commercial customers across the state of South Carolina, but we were struggling to find technicians to handle the business due to a growing shortage of skilled mechanics. The industry solution was to raid each other’s companies for employees, and that was not working for anyone.

So we decided to change the model and begin growing our own. Through our local Chamber of Commerce and the Midlands Education and Business Alliance, we sought invitations to speak to high school algebra classes. Math teachers were thrilled to have us come in. They said all they heard from their students was: “Why do I have to learn this? I’ll never use algebra in my life!”

The first time we went, I introduced our technician to thirty bored teenagers—and I thought to myself: “This is going to bomb so badly.” Our technician, Mike, opened up by saying, “The chiller at the hospital is down, it is 80°F (27°C) in the operating room, and the doctors cannot do surgeries. We have to find out what is wrong with the chiller and get it back on line. These are the readings we will need from the cooling system and these are the algebra formulas we will need to use to pinpoint where the problem is.” The students perked up and paid attention. Mike walked them through collecting the data and then asked them to run the calculations through the formulas. They all grabbed their calculators and started throwing out the answers. The teacher and I could feel the energy and excitement in the room rise. The students walked through the diagnostic process, systematically eliminating potential problems until they identified a restriction in the return air flow. The students were thrilled—they had found the problem. Mike explained how the restriction would be repaired and then gave them new readings to verify that the repair had worked. The chiller was back on line and the surgical floor was able to resume critical operations on patients. The teacher was speechless. Her students were excited about math because they saw how it was applied in the real world.

Then Mike told the class what he loved about his job. He said: “I love solving problems, I love working with my hands, I love working outdoors, I love the variety of going from job to job, AND I get to be a hero four times a day. When I show up people are hot, and an hour later I’ve got the A/C going. How many jobs let you be a hero everyday?” Hearing what Mike loved about his job, several of the 30 students said, “That’s me. I love those same things.” We invited those who were interested to job-shadow with one of our technicians. Over a four-year period, the enrollment in the HVAC program at Midlands Technical College doubled and continues to have a waiting list.
We have hired high school students as summer interns to work with our senior technicians. Our first intern, Jason, reported to work his first day with his pants hanging down, his shirttail out, slouching, and not making eye contact. I saw Jason the following Friday after he had spent a week with a technician—he was in uniform, shirttail tucked in, standing tall and he spoke to me with confidence. I asked Jason how his week went. With a big smile, he said it was the first time he had ever been treated like a grownup. Our technician had told Jason he was smart and could have a good career, but he would need to dress, and act, like an adult. Jason rose to those expectations and his life changed in that one week.

Jason is now a top chiller mechanic in our industry.

Total Comfort Solutions has supported the Skills USA program for high school students studying the skilled trades, working as judges in the HVAC competition. That's where we met Matt, a student at Goose Creek High School. Matt placed #1 in South Carolina and came to work for us as a co-op student his senior year in high school. We paid his tuition at Trident Tech in Charleston as he earned his degree, working 30 hr/week as a technician and taking great care of our customers. When speaking to high school students, Matt says he loves what he does—solving problems, working with tools, and taking care of customers. Then he adds: “When I was 19, I was making enough money to buy a truck—a new truck!”

Cedric began working with Total Comfort Solutions during his senior year in high school. After completing his associate’s degree at Midlands Technical College, he transferred to the University of South Carolina’s Engineering School, all the while working 30 hr/week as a commercial service technician and solving problems for our customers. Last June, Cedric graduated from USC with a degree in mechanical engineering. As a technician, he spent a lot of time working with our manufacturing clients and liked the manufacturing environment. Cedric is now a plant engineer with Frito-Lay in Georgia.

Career development is also an important part of our strategy to grow our own. Robby, the service manager in our Charleston office, is Matt’s boss. Ten years ago, Robby was a co-op student in our Greenville office, working with Total Comfort Solutions as he earned his HVAC degree. Robby was an outstanding student, and as a technician he earned a reputation for never giving up on tough mechanical problems. He became one of the company’s top diagnosticians. At 28, Robby transferred to our Charleston office, and at 30 became the service manager helping to lead Charleston as it was named the Linc Contractor of the Year, the top award for service contractors in North America.

The goal we set when Total Comfort Solutions began working with high school students and college co-op students was to grow our workforce. The strategy was successful, and that goal is being met. A significant portion of our operations staff has come to us as a result of our technicians and managers making connections with students, and helping them find a match with our industry.

And there have been benefits beyond hiring technicians. Having young people working in our business while they are pursuing their education brings a fresh dynamic to our company. The young people are energetic and eager to learn. Our senior staff takes pride in helping students apply their education in the field, encouraging their confidence, and enjoying being part of their growth into adulthood. Another benefit has been building management depth in our company, which has helped us to expand and grow. The service managers in two of our five operating divisions are under 30 and started as co-op students ten years ago. Two of our general managers are in their early 30s, and literally grew up in our company. These young leaders are innovative, are fast learners and, as a team, are driving the growth of our business.

Connecting to students in high school and college has worked very well for Total Comfort Solutions. It has provided the resources we need to grow, helped build our management depth, and added a dimension that challenges our company to embrace innovation, technology, new ideas, and growth. Growing our own has been a winning strategy.