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Japan-America Society of Tennessee Public Awareness Initiative

Impact: Japanese Business Investment in Tennessee

In association with the Tennessee World Affairs Council

Verbatim Transcript

A Conversation with Terry Messer

Dean of Business and Industry, Jackson State Community College

Video Recording on the JAST YouTube Channel

Patrick Ryan [00:00:23] Hello, I'm Patrick Ryan from the Tennessee World Affairs Council. I'm pleased to host another episode of the Japan-America Society of Tennessee Special Project on the impact of Japanese business in Tennessee today. We're pleased to talk with Terry Messer in Jackson, Tennessee. Terry is the Dean of Business and Industry at Jackson State Community College. Welcome, Terry. Thanks for joining us today.

Terry Messer [00:00:49] Thank you. I'm pleased to be here.

Patrick Ryan [00:00:52] Well, we're scanning the state to talk to community leaders and political leaders and corporate leaders and economic development folks, and have gotten a wide variety of perspectives of the overall investment by Japanese businesses in the state. And today, I believe you're going to share with us a specific example of how a Japanese business in your community has made an impact. First, let's start out a little bit learning a bit more about you and your position there at Jackson State Community College. So tell us, tell us something about yourself, Terry.

Terry Messer [00:01:34] Well, thank you. I'm Terry Messer. I'm the Dean of Business and Industry and Associate Professor of Economics here at Jackson State Community College. Jackson State is located in rural West Tennessee in between Nashville and Memphis, a community College that services a 14 county rural service area from river to river, as we call it. We have - Jackson State offers over 50 degree programs, both for the career ready programs - come here for a couple of years, get your skillset, go straight to the workforce - and those programs that would get you the first two years of a four year bachelor's degree. So there's different branches here available. I've been at Jackson State for over 20 years serving as an administrative role for 12 of those. The first ones were just as an faculty member.

But this is my second career. I came to higher education from the private sector, from the manufacturing sector. I started my career a few years ago in manufacturing, I have that

background. Went from everything from a literal production worker at Noranda, which is an aluminum smelting company in Huntington, while I was going to college and ended my career as a plant manager at Deere Automotive and everything in the in-between, with that. So this transition over to higher education, I was able to continue to work with our business community and particularly our manufacturing sector as I became dean with this area. And what I watch after now are all of the credit, noncredit, transfer, and career programs for business. Our engineering systems technology, which is our manufacturing type programs. Small business development center programs and several other areas that are directly business related. So with that, I have had the privilege of working with so many of our manufacturers to make sure that we, as the college, are providing them the worker that they need for tomorrow and for the expansion that our local and regional economy needs.

Patrick Ryan [00:03:50] Well, an impressive background and well-suited to combine the practical professional experience with your academic credentials. I'm sure that Jackson State Community College is fortunate to have you in position as dean there. Well, we wanted to talk about today was what's known as the Advanced Maintenance Technician Co-op. Why don't you tell us what that is all about and what Jackson State Community College's role is in that co-op?

Terry Messer [00:04:21] OK, I will. I guess I'll start back at the beginning, how this even launched. What we realized is when I took over as Dean, the directive that I was getting from administration at that time was that we needed to be more involved and make sure that we were providing our business community the exact worker with the skill sets that they needed, which is - that's always the goal but sometimes that's easier said than done. So my workforce development director and I did a huge research project, if you will, and literally visited all of our manufacturing firms and what we kept hearing, and again in our region there is, I think there's over 60 manufacturing firms. We visited at least two thirds of those. And what we were trying to do is what can we do as the college to provide you specifically the manufacturing related employees of the future. Because again, from my background, we know today that today's manufacturing landscape looks nothing like it did 30 years ago. It's not ... that type thing. So we were trying to - what do we need to do? Well, what we kept hearing over and over again is, Jackson State has a really good program to provide engineering technicians, maintenance technicians, the skilled trades, that part of it. However, they needed more hands-on experience. Well, we have a - we are very fortunate - we have the McWherter Center here at the Jackson State Community College. A sixty-six thousand square foot facility that has state of the art labs that were state of the art twenty-five years ago, okay? And we know that technology doesn't ... that. We as a state institution, very difficult to try to stay up with what industry needs just from a financial part, training part, everything that goes with it. It's just the logistics of it.

So with all of that, our thought process was okay, let's see how open folks would be to an apprenticeship type program. And we pulled everyone together, all of our advisory committees. What do you think? The word apprenticeship wasn't as positively received as we would have liked for it to have been because we realized we could do the technical training, but we're not going to be able to train on today's ... robots that you've got in your facility. I simply can't afford those at this stage. So it all evolved to one of the key managers, two of the key managers, one at Bodine Aluminum, which is now Toyota, and TBD, which is Toyota Boshoku Denso. Both of these individuals were on our program advisory committee, and one of them said I'd really like to talk to you about a program that's similar to what you guys are seeing we need. And it's a co-op program and one of our facilities in Kentucky has launched this really well doing exactly what you're saying. So

that is where the co-op example came from. And we will forever be indebted to the Toyota team who said, you know what, we can make this happen because it's happening at another facility.

What this co-op does, the students come to our campus here at Jackson State, they take classes two days a week and they work the other three days a week at a paid co-op at one of our consortium partners. The difference between what Toyota was doing and some of their other areas and what happened here is that at all the other Toyotas, which by the way, Jackson was the seventh EMT consortium that was launched. The other six, all of the students, student workers if you think of it that way, were all hired by Toyota because they had the huge OEM manufacturers. We don't have that in our area. So in order to make this work, we had to develop a consortium and pretty much what this meant is that we had to get several of our companies, the everything from the folks that have 50 employees to the ones that have, you know, 900 employees. How would you guys feel about us all working together, modeling it after the Toyota proven successful model that will get young people into the manufacturing field, that will give them hands on experience right off the bat, get them hooked into manufacturing and basically build your own pipeline of skilled workers. That was how it started. So that is, that was all based upon the Japanese cultures. They're just embedded in let's bring up. We all bring each other up, our overall communities are going to going to thrive. And that is exactly what has happened here.

Patrick Ryan [00:09:30] So was there much resistance to that among companies that operated under a different model or did it take a while to get that embedded in the community?

Terry Messer [00:09:39] It's just a little one. I don't think resistance was the right phrase because again, we had already kind of set the path for - they knew we were trying to do something different. They knew that we were trying to meet the needs of what they had. So with the extreme assistance of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce and their workforce group, they kind of strategically got us in front of some of the plant managers and the HR managers to try to say that, you know, all they were hearing at the time was, you know, we're not getting the skilled workers that we need.

Patrick Ryan [00:10:14] Sure.

Terry Messer [00:10:15] And so the rest of the story came with, okay, how can they be a part of the solution instead of just the ones that seem to be continuing to bring up the complaint. So to be this educational industry partnership it made sense, and when the question that I posed with almost all of the companies, talk to me about your attrition of the folks in your maintenance team. What's your average age? Many of them were going well, you know, mid-fifties, I said, okay, what have we got 10 years? They're going to be retiring at most. Most of them really started opening their eyes to whoa, we've got to do something to get some younger folks in, but not just young by age, the experience it was going to be walking out the doors with those folks that have been with their companies was unimaginable, so they had to be transferring that knowledge over.

So that was - many of the companies, as I said, jumped right on it. We had our core four companies that jumped in and said, you know what? One of them was a Armstrong Hardwood Floors, which was completely nothing to do with the Japanese model. But the HR and plant manager said, we've got it. Stanley Tools said the same thing. No, this is what we need. They realize that their attrition for their group, for their aging, engineering,

maintenance technicians, if this was the answer to kind of grow their own, they were certainly all in. So it was just, it was just a matter of how do we get it coordinated.

Patrick Ryan [00:12:01] So everybody bought into the program because they needed new skills, not the 20-year-old skills that that might have come through the pipeline. And it was a matter of building the talent pool. There was a competition for talent and everybody realized that the, as you call it, the Japanese theory of building up the community so that all prosper was attractive.

Terry Messer [00:12:31] Correct. Correct. Now we had some companies that, and again as we dug into, as we got deeper into establishing it, some of the companies were - and I'll just say it like it is - the H.R. and the plant managers, they certainly got it. But in order for this program to be successful, it had to be the boots on the ground mentors that were working alongside these students. Those were the key. Those individuals inside each one of these companies that were going to be working with the students. Those were the folks that were going to, so to speak, make or break that student's experience and the company's experience. So we did have some companies - I'm not going to sit here and say that everything was smooth - we had some companies that liked the idea, but they may not have had the internal infrastructure set up to provide that mentorship that was needed at the level that it was needed to be successful.

So some companies tried it and said, you know, this is just not going to work for us. We had one company that was a Japanese space that was new that came to the area, great company we helped recruit. I was thrilled to have them, and they took one of co-ops right off the bat. They were in a very brand-new facility with brand new million-dollar pieces of equipment that they were not going to allow some green student to even touch. So that really evolved into it wasn't being - it just wasn't, it didn't quite work for them at that time.

Patrick Ryan [00:14:05] So now the driving force behind this new theory. There are a couple of Toyota related companies there. There's the Toyota Motor Manufacturing of Tennessee and also TBDN, the Toyota Boshoku Denso Corporation. So were they both involved in bringing this theory to the front?

Terry Messer [00:14:31] As a matter of fact, the Toyota Boshoku, the TBDN, one of their key managers is the chairperson of our advisory committee for the program, and he has been from day one. I mean, he's like the speed dial - SOS I need help, he'll call me back. Also, another key force at the beginning was the other, TBTN, which is Toyota Boshoku Tennessee, which is still in a version with that. They too were very highly involved in that and had one of our first, took some of our first cohort of students and two of them are still employed there and have risen up the ranks, so to speak, of management there. So it's been a very, very positive thing.

Patrick Ryan [00:15:23] Now is this co-op still evolving? Are there day to day conversations with all the players?

Terry Messer [00:15:34] Yes, I would say day to day in different levels because we have grown from initially they were - we ended up starting the co-op with 10 companies that had agreed to, if you will, sponsor a student. And now we're at 29 as of today. So the evolution has been just the individual nuances of each company bringing on students and then you have more students there. And the way that this consortium works, it's truly an educational industry partnership. So these students are expected to adhere to every work qualification or accommodation that the employers are expecting, as well as what the companies, what

we expect here at the school. We've meshed the two, everything from professionalism and professional dress, you know, punctuation, all of the soft skills things that we're embedding within this. So it's very vital. We have a completion coordinator on my staff that 75 percent of her job is to make sure that these students in this consortium are adhering to the standards at the company, as well as adhering to our expectations here at the college.

That that does require day to day - I don't know day to day with every single company - but day to day, are we talking with someone in the consortium with 29 partners and 60 students? Probably. Now formally, yes, we meet. I actually coordinate all of the engineering maintenance technician and subcommittee. We get together at least annually, if not twice a year, and multiple email, Zoom sessions as needed regarding the curriculum. Really what's being taught in the classes. And many of these partners have been our support that we have been able to use for multiple grant opportunities that we've been able to provide and receive to update our equipment down in the labs. Over this same time frame of about the last seven to eight years we have had over 2.2 million dollar's worth of new equipment that has been secured and been put in. And again, this is new equipment that will more closely align with what the training that they're needing when they walk, that they see. They walk out of here being trained on Fanuc robots, smaller version. They roll into Toyota Manufacturing and they see the exact same robot only in a much larger scale but the operations of it are the same.

Then also our H.R., which is our human resource group, has their own consortium partner, our subcommittee that meets at least twice to three times a year to determine what needs to be changed, what needs to be tweaked, what are they seeing as far as the issues? And again, all of these companies are coming together. All of these consortiums agree to pay that the students the same pay rate. They each get a raise after each successful semester here at Jackson State if they adhere to their safety standards and attendance and our great expectations. So it's just a lot of fun. I would have as an outsider coming from the public sector, I thought, well, we can try this. I'm not sure this will work. But from the private sector, but I'm sitting here watching it. It's very, very rewarding.

Patrick Ryan [00:19:14] That's a terrific story, it sounds like a win all the way around. Tell us a little bit about the students. What kind of numbers are we talking about? And has this impacted your recruiting, the satisfaction of the students to know that they're getting cutting edge training at Jackson State and also an opportunity to move into the industrial base there?

Terry Messer [00:19:41] Yes, the numbers that we're talking, I'll start with that one. About an average of about 70 students rolling through the program at any one time. Not all of them have chosen to be a part of the co-op because many of them are working elsewhere and we're a big agricultural group here, so there may not be that many. All of that. We have 29 companies that will, that are currently accepting students and want them. We have about four more right now that are interested in joining the consortium. But I had to kind of put - I kind of pulled back on the recruiting for companies. Getting the companies to join wasn't the issue. Unfortunately, it's still overcoming the manufacturing sector concern that many of our students' influencers - that's what I call them, the parents or grandparents, whoever are influencing - they don't want their little Johnny to go into manufacturing because their view of manufacturing was what it was 30 years ago, that it was a dirty non-desirable place to work. That is the hurdle that I don't care what company you're going to, that's still the hurdle that we're doing when we look at recruiting. The students get it. What they see is oh great, I can go to school two days a week, I can have

a job three days a week. I'm going to be making good money working days at a company. I'm going to be able to learn a lot.

Patrick Ryan [00:21:08] Running a robot is not a shirt factory.

Terry Messer [00:21:12] It is not, and the skill set that's needed for that are so transferable. And particularly for this, you know, for our maintenance technicians, engineering technicians, whatever you want to call them, this is - these are very transferable skills. And but many of, especially in our rural areas, many of the companies, many of their influencers have been impacted by someone who got laid off when the shirt factory closed and had a hard time finding another job. And so the sell, if you will, is to help them say that, no, this is a skilled trade that if that company leaves, trust me, you've got a line of other companies going, I'll take you, I'll take you, I'll take you. So that has still been - the recruiting has still been an issue because we still need students coming in that are number one, mechanically inclined that are, you know, that think along those lines, that understand how things are torn apart and put back together. And that's something that they thrive on. That is - and many of those folks are you're sharper high school students. So many of the high school counselors are encouraging those folks to go on to perhaps a four-year university as opposed to looking at this as being a viable career, which is what I have to make sure they understand. You know, this is a huge career opportunity with growth potential enormous. I've been in manufacturing, my whole family has been our entire career and lived very comfortably. So that's the harder part for us.

Patrick Ryan [00:22:44] Well, what a what a great program and a big hat tip to you and others at Jackson State and the consortium partners. Tell us a little bit how Japanese business investment is viewed in the community. You've got a number of companies there that are Japanese origin companies that have chosen Jackson as a place to invest. And you know, we're long past the hurdle of accepting international investment in general and Japanese investment in particular. But what's the relationship in the community to see that these companies are there to contribute to the community in addition to finding a base of operations?

Terry Messer [00:23:30] I would say yes, and I think the first part of what you said is true as far as the historical context of Japanese companies. I think that generation is is kind of past. So what is viewed in our area - I mean, when you look at your, it's your top companies here. All of these Japanese are listed right off the bat. Many of the companies again, the TBDN, TBTN, definitely Toyota Manufacturing Bodine, you're going to see that they are at the top of everyone's list with viable companies as well as all of our other larger employers. They do a lot of community involvement. And again, they're encouraging. They encourage, just like with this consortium. They didn't mind sharing their curriculum. They didn't mind sharing best practices. Look, guys, this is what worked at our Kentucky plant. You think we can make this work here?

Now, initially, some people are a little taken aback and going, okay, it's just going to be a Japanese program. And once they get into it, I don't care if you call it five s or three s, it's all the same concept of let's use some really good manufacturing principles. So, yes, from a community side, they're well integrated in a lot of the organizations, many of the community. Our local community, they're involved in heavily and you see their names. They are just a part of the community as if they have been here forever. And many of these companies, I don't have exact numbers, but many of these companies just started, if you will, evolve into the Jackson area. Bodine is the one, I think they opened in 2004 or

2005, and the others came along after that. The TBDN has been around longer, maybe in the late nineties.

Patrick Ryan [00:25:38] OK, well, Terry, you've really given us a lot of information to understand the impact of the Japanese business investment in the Jackson area in your 14-county area between the rivers. But let's just close with how you would characterize how would you explain to somebody who was new to the topic what has been the impact in your area from Japanese businesses coming there?

Terry Messer [00:26:10] The impact from Japanese businesses coming here is to bring the positive of their business model to the rest of the business community here and in our region. And again, what I mean by that is the sharing of their best practices, as I said, the sharing of their time and their energy, the sharing of the relationships that they have embedded with their employees. I mean, I have every one of them on speed dial and literally have had to call a couple of times, hey, I need help with this particular lab equipment. We can't get it working. TBDN is, by the way, just right up the road here from where we are. Before I'll look up, two of their technicians are here. It wasn't a, let me do something else. It's okay. One of their partners needed help, and they were here. It's just - the relationship and how we can build on that. I have just been so impressed and that is what the overall community sees with the Japanese culture that was brought to our region of West Tennessee via these companies and their administrative and management team.

Patrick Ryan [00:27:28] Well, again, a great story, and thanks for sharing your time with us today. We've been talking with Terry Messer, who is the Dean of Business and Industry at Jackson State Community College in Jackson, Tennessee. Terry, thanks so much for your time today. We appreciate you helping us understand the impact of Japanese business investment in Tennessee.

Terry Messer [00:27:48] Well, you're quite welcome, I appreciate the opportunity, and I wish you all the best of luck.

Patrick Ryan [00:27:53] Thank you. This is Patrick Ryan for the Tennessee World Affairs Council. We're pleased to help the Japan-America Society of Tennessee with this public awareness initiative to help us all understand what the impact of Japanese businesses has been in the state. You can find more in this series on the JAST YouTube channel and at our website TNWAC.org. Thank you very much for watching, and we look forward to bringing you more programs in the series.