

An Event for All

WESTEC is positioning itself as an event for not only businesses of all sizes and interests, but also attendees of all ages.

Alex Cannella, News Editor

There are a lot of trade shows that vie for the manufacturing crowd's attention any given year, and even more conferences and educational seminars, but WESTEC is a rarer beast; it wants to be both. Alongside the usual trade show experience you might expect walking the floor, WESTEC is providing numerous educational offerings from their Machining Academy to even a seminar on how California businesses can take advantage of local skills gap funding.

With incentives for companies both new or old and local or distant, SME wants to give everyone a reason to attend WESTEC, but they seem to hold a special place for small and medium businesses. A number of the show's panel discussions are focused on giving small and medium businesses the know-how they need to thrive in the current changing industrial world.

"We tend to like to talk about the Northrop Grumman and the Boeings of the world, but really, the heart of manufacturing, the bulk of manufacturing in the United States is small- and medium-sized businesses," Debbie Holton, VP of events at SME, said. "And events like WESTEC are a great place for them to come, see technology in action, meet with people that have expertise, and then talk to their peers, make business connections, and get a lot done in a very short period of time."

One of the primary educational offerings that will interest small and medium businesses are WESTEC's various panels on the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) designed to get manufacturers up to speed about the topic. One such example will be the Smart Manufacturing Series workshop. The series will feature three seminars across



the show's three days that will focus on different cornerstones of IIoT technology ranging from automation and robotics to additive manufacturing. Experts from companies ranging from IBM to Siemens will be sharing from their companies' well of knowledge on best practices, case studies and more.

"Part of the urgency in manufacturing right now in general is just that the technology is changing so fast..." Holton said. "Coming now and already here are the demands of the OEMs that people get in line and know how to use these advanced technologies. We definitely don't want people left behind. It's SME's responsibility to get out there and bring folks into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and that's what we're doing with WESTEC and a lot of our programs out there right now."

According to Holton, SME is responding accordingly to many of the urgent changes in the industry by making sure attendees leave their IIoT seminars with somewhere to start, something actionable they can start doing now to make sure they don't fall behind.

"We all like to sit in the brain calisthenics and think about 'wow, what can I do?' But to have something actionable going out is the best," Holton said.

WESTEC's panel topics won't be limited to just the Industrial Internet. Another hot button topic Holton expects will draw attention will be a seminar on how OEMs can break into the supplier business, which will be part of the larger Business of Manufacturing series of seminars. The Business of Manufacturing

focuses specifically on small- to medium-sized businesses and the unique challenges associated with running one.

Running in parallel with WESTEC's panels will be SME's Machining Academy, a program designed to give attendees an opportunity to review, validate or brush up on their machining knowhow. Before coming to the show, attendees can take an assessment from SME to measure their machining skills, then go to the Machining Academy and engage in interactive training with live machinery on the trade show floor.

"What we were looking to do at WESTEC is to have some type of marriage between the live excitement of the trade show floor and all the equipment that's there and under power and the fact that we can provide training and online assessments to people in advance. So basically what we're planning to do is have people who sign up for this be able to take an assessment in advance of their skills and knowledge in machining, and then come to the show and actually demonstrate that knowledge on machinery under power."

In addition to helping engineers review and validate the skills they've already obtained, the Machining Academy can also highlight areas they may need to brush up on. The academy is part of SME's larger efforts to address the skills gap in the industry, a problem only being exacerbated by the rapid changes the Industrial Internet is bringing to the industry, but Holton stressed that it isn't meant to train a fresh employee from start to finish in a single



week. However, many of the lessons and online assessments that are being used for the Machining Academy are part of SME's longer online courses on the topic.

Perhaps reflecting some of the changes the Industrial Internet is bringing to the industry as a whole, Holton has noted a surge of attention placed on automation on the trade show floor, as well. A number of new automation and robotics exhibitors have joined the show, and Holton thinks they'll be an important addition for attendees to look out for.

"I think it's important, especially in aerospace industries where a lot of that work is still done by hand, to look at ways we can utilize automation to both increase quality and productivity, but also reduce some of the repetitive stress injuries and things that happen in that field...And things that really were out of the reach of most manufacturers years ago are now at a price point on a capabilities side that makes sense for them to consider it in some way."

SME has even adjusted their educational offerings that cater to a younger audience, what they're calling the Student Innovation Tour. In the past, students that attended WESTEC were

often placed in more traditional classrooms and given lectures by guest speakers, then cut loose to explore the trade show floor. However, according to Holton, SME is shifting away from the classic schoolroom approach and trying something different this year.

"We realized that they sit in classrooms all the time, and that might not be the best way for us to reach them and show them how fun and exciting manufacturing is," Holton said.

Instead, SME is attempting what Holton describes as a "Disney-world style orientation." Instead of a traditional classroom, students go through a special presentation area with interactive exhibits, including a "rocket challenge" that tasks students with determining the weight and trajectory of rockets and competing for both accuracy and longest distance. Afterwards, they're sent out to the trade show floor, but SME is also providing several student friendly booths for them to visit on their tour that will have presentations prepared for them.

Much like the rest of the industry, WESTEC is changing with the times to meet the new opportunities and

demands of the Industrial Internet, and that means that like the rest of the industry, WESTEC is changing more from year to year than ever. SME is working hard to not just keep WESTEC up with the times, but also its attendees.

"When you have a long-running show like WESTEC, people think 'oh yeah, I've been there, I've seen that. It used to be this and it used to be that,'" Holton said. "But really I think it is a very pivotal event for people in this marketplace, and there's technology there that they're going to miss if they're not there. For folks that need to come and make the most of their time and they're looking at technology or they want to evaluate equipment for purchase, there's no better place than this event this year." 

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