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Real jobs, real young

AstroNova invests in youthful engineering leaders



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ON THE LINE: Andres Gonzales explained to Governor Gina Raimondo how the assembly process worked on the production line he leads at AstroNova. (WARWICK BEACON PHOTOS)



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By **ETHAN HARTLEY**

Andres Gonzales and Isamar Morales are only 23 and 25 years old respectively, but both are already leaders in their fields. And although neither of them seemed particularly keen on being in the spotlight, their blossoming careers in engineering are prime examples of what Governor Gina Raimondo hopes to showcase on a regular basis.

Highlighting their early success was part of the plan on Thursday morning, when Raimondo and personnel from the Department of Labor and Training visited the youthful pair of lead technicians at AstroNova, the NASDAQ-traded, West Warwick-based company that specializes in manufacturing digital printing and aerospace materials.

Gonzales and Morales took different paths to end up where they are. Morales attended college for three years before joining the National Guard as an engineer and going through a deployment, finding her way to AstroNova when she got back. Gonzales went to New England Tech and got an associate's degree in electrical engineering before AstroNova gave him his first job.

However, both shared a mechanism in common for how they eventually got to where they are today. That would be Real Jobs RI, the state-sanctioned program that encourages employers to provide additional education and training to employees to help them rise through the ranks and earn better jobs within in-demand industries, such as advanced engineering.

During a sit-down meeting with Raimondo, Gonzales and Morales and AstroNova administrators, including vice president of human resources Matthew Cook, it was explained how there is a serious age gap in the engineering field. In general, employees are either new in the field or are advancing in age.

"For so long there wasn't fresh talent coming through to engineering careers," said Cook. "We have to identify that next generation of future leaders for the organization."

AstroNova collaborates with the William M. Davies Jr. Career and Technical High School in Lincoln through internship opportunities to students – which is where Gonzales attended high school. The company has also partnered with the University of Rhode Island to offer higher education training in leadership to its employees, helping them attain higher goals and employment within their career.

The partnerships are exactly what Raimondo is hoping to see more of throughout the state – a company investing time and resources into its employees through collaborative partnerships with technical schools and the state’s higher education facilities. According to Cook, about 120 workers at AstroNova have gone through the 16-week professional leadership development program.

Cook said that setting up the leadership program was also a collaborative effort between multiple companies, who helped URI construct a curriculum that would most efficiently translate directly into the workplace, regardless of where the employees wound up. Raimondo found this interesting, that companies would choose to collaborate in creating a program that wouldn’t guarantee the employees would actually stay with the company who helped them access the training.

“A rising tide floats all boats,” Cook said. “The more talent we have in the state, the better it is for everybody...The success of this program is essential to shore up our future.”

Along with helping young employees gain leadership skills early, AstroNova has also set up a mentoring program within the company so that newly-trained leaders have an experienced mentor to guide them as they begin to take on additional responsibilities. The goal is to create two “cohorts” of leaders in two levels. Level one leaders lead a production line, like Morales and Gonzales, and level two leaders coordinate and guide those individuals in level one.

Being a lead technician isn’t simply a nice title either. Cook described how Gonzales in particular was instrumental in optimizing the production line for products that were formerly made by Honeywell. AstroNova partially acquired Honeywell’s aerospace manufacturing component last year, and now those jobs have come back from Malaysia to Rhode Island. On Thursday, Gonzales described how his team was assembling cockpit printers for planes, one of AstroNova’s specialty products.

The product is a perfect example of the intricacies of advanced engineering. A cockpit printer serves as a vital failsafe for pilots, as they can print maps and schematics that may not be readily available digitally, or should instrumentation malfunction. They also function on a more basal level to print receipts for in-flight purchases. AstroNova sells to most major airlines and to the United States military.

Gonzales and Morales said that the leadership training through URI was incredibly beneficial, and has given them the confidence to work with people who are many years their senior. Gonzales tip-toed around the issue, not wanting to call his coworkers old, but ultimately pointed out the challenges associated with the age disparity.

“I felt like I had to be at a certain level of mentality to get on their level and work with them,” he said.

“Before you know it, you’ll be running the company,” said Raimondo, providing an opportunity for Thomas Carll, vice president and general manager of AstroNova’s Aerospace division, to poke fun at the young employee.

“Yeah, one day you’ll be old,” he said, sending the room into a fit of laughter.

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