

Volkswagen calls for more educated workforce

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Volkswagen officials in Chattanooga on Friday called for more highly skilled workers and better efforts between companies and government to fill future slots at its plant and other businesses.

"We don't want in the future to have skill gaps," said Hans-Herbert Jagla, executive vice president of human resources for Volkswagen in the city.

Jagla said an enhanced partnership between the business sector and government could help.

"What we're trying to do with education is secure the future," he said in an editorial board meeting at the Chattanooga Times Free Press. "We need to invest more together."

As an example, Jagla cited a dual system of "professional education" similar to apprenticeship programs that VW has started at its plant along with Chattanooga State Community College.

The German automaker and CSCC have joined to create a pair of initiatives designed to train technicians in some of the most complex jobs at the assembly plant.

The Automotive Mechatronics and Car Mechatronics programs have 65 people enrolled, according to VW.

"There is a shared responsibility," Jagla said.

Both three-year programs, they permit students to gain classroom work as well as paid, on-the-job training inside the Enterprise South industrial park plant.

Kathrin Hoeckel, an analyst for the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, said Germany and some other European countries have a dual system where there's a constant exchange of ideas between business and government.

"Here, most employers think 'Education isn't our job,'" she said. "We just want to receive the final product."

Jana Eichel, a VW employees relations specialist, said progress is being made.

She cited the Pathways to Prosperity Network, a multistate, multiyear initiative that combines rigorous academics with strong technical education. Tennessee is one of six states taking part, Eichel said, and Georgia is considering joining.

Jagla said VW in Chattanooga employs about 3,300 workers, and it has found "the right people, trainable people."

But he called for a system where there is a shared responsibility between public schools and employers. Jagla said Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam is receptive to the idea.

"I'm convinced we can lower the unemployment rate if we do this," Jagla said.