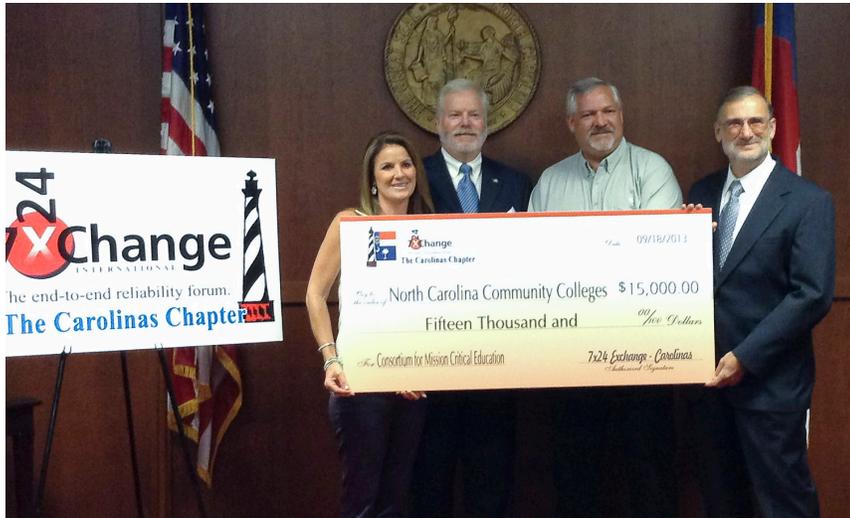


Casting the Net for Future Mission Critical Workers



L to R, Robin Aron, 7x24 Carolinas Advisor, David Knight, 7x24 Carolinas Membership Chairman, Tom Jacobik, 7x24 Carolinas President, Paul Marcoux, 7x24 Carolinas Education Committee Chairman

When Paul Marcoux attends national industry conferences, he says he's "amazed at the amount of white hair he sees." As education committee chair for the Carolinas chapter of 7x24, he's well aware of the need for young people to enter the field.

Thousands of people are retiring from mission critical jobs. Yet there has been a decline in workers entering fundamental trades over the past 15 years. Paul, who is senior vice president for mission critical services for BB&T, estimates that five years from now, much of the talent will be gone.

This leaves a void, and Paul is happy to accept the challenge of trying to fill it.

Initially, the approach was to provide scholarships to students. "We gave two schools each a check for \$2000 and said, 'Give it to your best mission critical capable people.' What we learned is that the world doesn't even know what 'mission critical' is, and that it's more effective to create a 'net.'" By a "net" Paul refers to the aphorism that says if you give a man a fish he eats for a day. If you give him a net and teach him to fish, he eats the rest of his life. In this case, the net is in the form of support to schools to develop a mission critical curriculum and seed money to help acquire grants to build out comprehensive programs.

"The ultimate solution became to support the schools themselves and let them begin to do the training. That's what they do best," he says. So a new plan went into motion. The Carolinas chapter raised \$15,000, which they gave to the technical schools in the Carolinas. The schools used the money to defer the cost of grant writing. The grants would secure federal, state, and school funds to create a mission critical education program in the state. "We were able to secure a \$23 million grant for North Carolina, part of which will also be shared with Georgia," reports Paul.

The Carolinas chapter has already developed course descriptions and core curriculum to support a mission critical emphasis. In doing the groundwork for the grant writing, Paul did a lot of research. “We determined how many jobs could be created through mission critical education,” he notes. “With the grant, the Department of Labor now classifies mission critical as a unique career field.

“So we’ve legitimized the career field, and we have adequate funds to establish the program. We’re creating a path for students coming out of high school. And we’re looking to people coming out of the military, who already have a background in many of the areas where we need talent.” The field is suited to students in numerous fields, and the promise of job availability and promotion is high. Careers might include electronics, HVAC, pipefitting, plumbing, building management, software development, and environmental protection. “There are a lot of hats people can wear in this industry,” Paul says. “There’s not a hat tree with that many hooks. If you can work in a team environment and continue to learn, you have a bright future in mission critical.”

Paul is clearly enthusiastic about his role. “I’m very proud to be part of this education evolution,” he says. “Carolinas 7x24 has been instrumental in moving the needle. We’ve made a difference. And we’re not done yet.”

Paul Marcoux is senior vice president of mission critical services for BB&T.