



## Case Study



Years in Business

39



Number of Employees

800



Employees Enrolled in Tooling U-SME since 2018

100

# Machine Tool Company Builds Dedicated Workforce With Apprenticeships

Established program targets turnover with training from Tooling U-SME



## GROB'S STORY

A pioneer in the construction of innovative, high-quality machine tools, GROB was founded by Ernst Grob in 1926 in Munich, Germany. The company manufactured its first product — a thread milling machine — in 1933. Today, GROB remains a family-owned company, has five global facilities — in Germany, Brazil, Italy, China and the United States — and is a leader in designing and building highly innovative production and automation systems.

Like all of GROB's facilities, and stemming from the company's apprenticeship-focused German origins, its U.S. facility in Bluffton, Ohio — which houses 800 employees — has had an apprenticeship program from the start. In Bluffton's case, the first class of apprentices was hired before the plant opened in 1983.

Since 2018, online courses from workforce development expert Tooling U-SME — recommended by the Bluffton facility's apprenticeship partner, Rhodes College — have been an integral part of the apprenticeship program. The program allows GROB to place a premium on soft skills rather than technical skills when hiring new workers straight out of high school, since all will learn the necessary technical skills after joining the company.



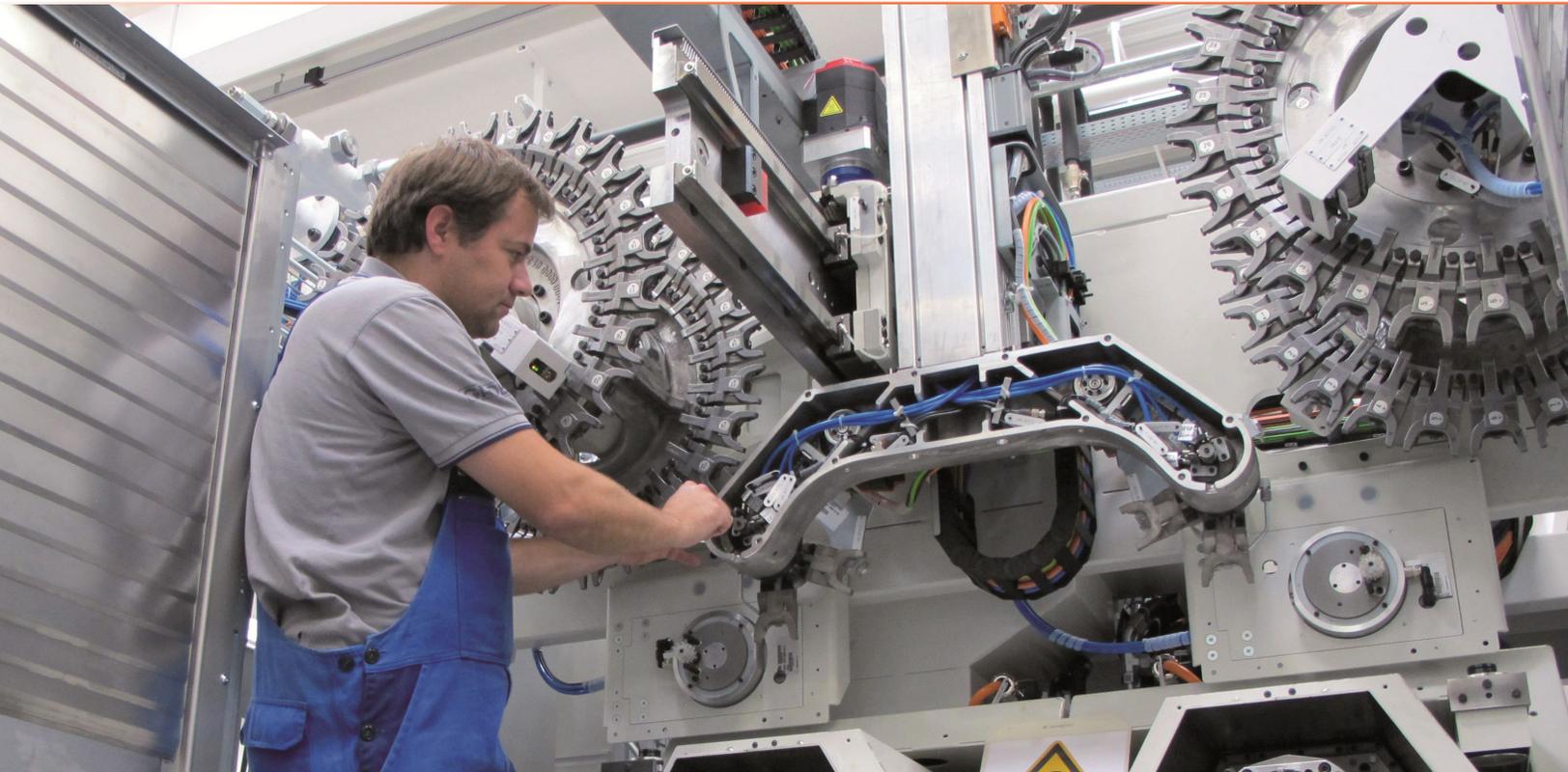


## CHALLENGES

While the apprenticeship program was in place from the start at the Bluffton facility, GROB's five-person training staff needed to refine it and better gear it toward the needs of rural Bluffton.

"The closest metropolitan area we've got is Toledo, which is an hour and a half north of us, or Dayton, which is an hour and a half south of us," says Mark Reed, apprenticeship training supervisor for GROB's Bluffton facility. "So we have a workforce in our area that does not have a huge amount of skilled trades experience, and we need to train our workforce in specialized skill abilities that we need to have here."

GROB is also in a period of explosive growth, and is combating a higher-than-normal turnover rate. "Historically we're around 5 to 6 percent turnover, but that rate has gone up for a couple of reasons — the whole deal with COVID, and everybody's hurting for people," says Reed. "With the skill sets that we're providing and with our apprenticeship program, [our employees] are very attractive candidates for other companies."



## SOLUTION

**Over the years, GROB's Bluffton facility has adapted its apprenticeship program to include a partnership with Ohio's Rhodes College as well as associated elearning from Tooling U-SME. Apprentices earn a two-year associate degree from Rhodes and take Tooling U-SME online courses in both technical and leadership areas.**

"We use Tooling U-SME to give apprentices valuable training when the trainer's not available at a specific time," says Reed. "They're able to go in and spend half an hour or more working on some Tooling U-SME lessons where they can get theoretical training that supplements hands-on training."

"The way Tooling U-SME is set up, apprentices are picking up more information, and today, any information you can get is going to give you an advantage."

## Apprenticeship Paths

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GROB offers two separate paths for its apprentices — a mechanical path and an electrical path.

“Our mechanical path is for technicians who are going to be working on the actual manufacturing of a machine — making the components in our subassembly areas and our pipefitting fabrication area, and then out in our final assembly area where they’re bringing everything together,” says Reed. Mechanics also travel to customer sites, get machines up and running on shop floors, and train people to run the machines properly.

On the electrical side, Reed says technicians “build the brains” of the machines and drives, using software from GROB’s engineering group. “All our machines are custom machines, so it’s basically reinventing the wheel of every machine,” he says. “We have to have very highly skilled technicians.” Electrical technicians travel to customer sites with mechanics, helping to set up the machines and installing programming software as well.

For both paths, apprentices spend their entire first year of training in a non-productive capacity. In their second and final year of apprenticeship, they work alongside skilled trades employees on the shop floor to learn what they do.

After completing their apprenticeships, GROB employees work throughout all areas of the company, but most end up in traditional skilled trades roles. “I would say probably 90 percent of those employees are going to wind up in the manufacturing portion of the company,” says Reed, “but we have apprentices in every aspect of our company. Our management structure has a lot of former apprentices in it, all the way up to our executive level.”

**“One [benefit] is having the luxury of not looking for extreme experience. We can give all new employees the skills they need. Because of that, we are able to look at aptitude levels and other things that are going to lead to getting a highly skilled and highly dedicated employee.”**

## Required and Developmental Training

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Apprentices — most of whom join GROB straight out of high school — participate in traditional classroom learning, online learning and on-the-job-training. They attend classes twice a week at Rhodes College, which GROB partnered with in 2012, to earn an associate degree and get a journeyperson’s card. They also take online courses — including 10 assembly and fastener courses — from Tooling U-SME.

“Those are the ones we make sure they get done first,” says McKenzie Shaw, apprenticeship coordinator at GROB, about the assembly and fastener courses. “We get a certificate for that, and we use that for tech cred, so we get reimbursed for the Tooling U-SME cost. They at least take the 10 courses, and we suggest some beyond that if they have the time.”

“We saw the value of it when students started using it,” says Reed about Tooling U-SME. “It kind of showed up on our doorstep, and we really liked what we were getting from it.” Apprentices also like it, says Reed. “They see what they’re getting out of it, and they enjoy taking a break from the physical side of their work and exercising their brains.”

GROB pays for all the apprentices’ schooling and pays them for an eight-hour workday while they’re taking classes.



## Accelerated Apprenticeship Program

In addition to providing a two-year apprenticeship to employees who join the company straight out of high school, GROB is now offering an accelerated two-week version of the program to provide basic training to outside hires who have come onboard due to GROB's recent growth spurt. "As we go through these growth spurts, management has to hire a lot of people from outside who haven't been through the apprenticeship program," says Reed. "And that helps us with the program, because management identifies the skills that are lacking in people who are coming in from outside."

 Tooling U-SME Courses Taken Per Apprentice, Per Year  
**40-50**

**“Not having the soft skills leads to absenteeism, it leads to a lack of dedication, and it leads to a lack of drive and dedication, and if we’re able to hire based on those skills rather than technology skills, in the end it leads to a much better employee, higher retention and a higher level of job satisfaction.”**



Since customizing the apprenticeship program to the Bluffton facility's needs, GROB has experienced a number of business benefits.

"One of those is having the luxury of not looking for extreme experience," says Reed. "We can give all new employees the skills they need from a theoretical standpoint with the education, to the practical standpoint with the actual hands-on skills, because we have a dedicated training staff. Because of that, we are able to look at aptitude levels and other things that are going to lead to getting a highly skilled and highly dedicated employee, and not have to worry about the technical aspect.

**"When you're training new employees who don't know everything and don't know exactly what they're going to be doing, you're very busy. So we supplement some of that training with Tooling U-SME."**

"Not having the soft skills leads to absenteeism, it leads to a lack of dedication, it leads to a lack of drive and dedication, and if we're able to hire based on those skills rather than technology skills, in the end it leads to a much better employee, higher retention and a higher level of job satisfaction — on their side as well. If they're happy doing what they're doing, it's a benefit to the company."

Due to GROB's recent explosive growth — more than 200 new employees have joined the company since COVID-19 started — the company has also been able to see firsthand the difference in skill level between employees who have been through the apprenticeship training and those who haven't.

"There's a significant difference in the level of skill and the ability to analyze a problem and solve a problem," notes Reed. "Things that 19- and 20-year-olds deem as common sense because they've had all that investment and training don't realize the skill level they have until they work with somebody who hasn't had the advantage of all that training."



## INTO THE FUTURE

GROB plans to keep changing its apprenticeship program based on company needs and shop requirements, which the training team determines through annual meetings with top management as well as unscheduled, day-to-day discussions with managers, supervisors and apprentices.

"We spend a significant part of our time wandering around our shop floor talking to apprentices and the people they're working with to see if they've identified skills they don't have that they need," says Reed.

One thing that won't change is GROB's reliance on a strong training program. "We've found out that by starting employees off on the right foot with that training at the very beginning, it creates a very dedicated workforce," says Reed.

**"In general, [apprentices] view Tooling U-SME positively. They see what they're getting out of it, and they enjoy taking a break from the physical side of their work and exercising their brains."**

### Training Department 5 Trainers:

- 1 supervisor
- 1 coordinator
- 1 mechanical trainer
- 1 electrical trainer
- 1 junior mechanical trainer

### Tooling U-SME Courses

- Assembly and fastener courses
- Leadership and supervisory courses

### Physical Training Setup

- Training classroom holding 24 apprentices
- Electrical lab area holding 20 apprentices
- 15 laptop computers

### Apprentices Enrolled in Tooling U-SME

- 40 as of August 2022
- 36 scheduled to enroll in Fall 2022

To find out how Tooling U-SME can help your company create a world-class training program, call 866.706.8665 or email [info@toolingu.com](mailto:info@toolingu.com)



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