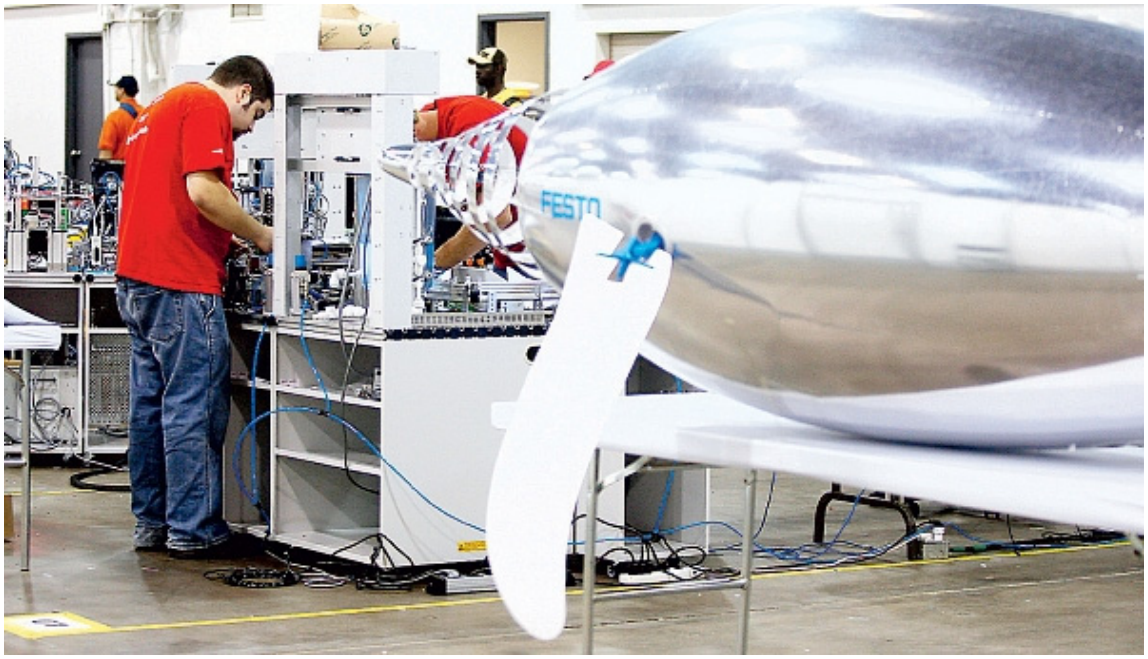
Spectators riveted by mechatronics

Competition the biggest with 28 entrants

BY GINA TEEL, CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 5, 2009



The popular mechatronic Festo penguin gets a break during Worldskills calgary 2009.
Photograph by: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

M aybe it's the giant, futuristic silver penguin 'swimming' gracefully above the competition ring inside the Big Four Building, or the jellyfish with blue lights that bobs up and down inside a liquid-filled chamber, but the mechatronics competition is drawing its fair share of spectators.

Onlookers, mostly young and male, stand transfixed as they ogle the jellyfish, which functions, tentacles and all, in eerily realistic manner for something made out of plastic and metal.

Judging from the utterances spontaneously bursting forth from the lips of children, the automated creations from competition equipment provider Festo are WAY COOL.

This fascination might explain why mechatronics, which combines the skills of mechanics and electronics, is the largest competition at World-Skills Calgary 2009.

There are 28 countries competing here in the mechatronics competition. Each team has two members, who are given a new task each day of the competition, Craig Brazil tells captivated students parked on bleachers overlooking the competition.

At the end of the competition, they'll be required to put all the projects together into one functioning system.

Brazil, a millwright by trade from Toronto who's leading the presentation at the skill ambassador station, clearly has the attention of the reams of kids parked on the bleachers.

Mechatronics can be used to build mechanized systems in oil and gas industry, food processing and

manufacturing. Applications in the real world are limitless, he tells the kids as the competitors beaver away in the distance.

Brazil told the kids they need to be strong in math and science, be good at problem solving and like to build things. A typical starting salary in mechatronics is around $40,000 to $50,000, but once specialized, "the sky is the limit," he tells them.

Student Mitchell Hurd from Thomas B. Riley school said he found the presentation interesting and easy to understand, in terms of what he needs to be good at to pursue mechatronics as a career.

"The electronics is pretty cool," Hurd said, adding he's not that fluent in electronics yet, but that could soon change. "I'm very excited and maybe one day I might be going here, too," he said of the competition underway in the background.

Kyle Pearce, who previously represented Alberta in a skills competition in mechatronics, and this year is a WorldSkills skills ambassador, was also on hand to encourage the kids.

Pearce, who took his training at SAIT, is currently using his skills in a job in Calgary in the oil and gas industry.

Pearce said he became fascinated with mechatronics as a kid, when he went to a weeklong summer science camp. During the camp, he toured factories that had mechatronics equipment and was hooked.

Pearce didn't consider mechatronics as a field simply because he didn't know about it. He later took first-year engineering in Vancouver, but hated it. He moved to Alberta and found SAIT's course offering. Pearce still says mechatronics needs to be promoted more.

"We have by far the sexiest lab at SAIT, and it's so much fun. The skills you learn are so, so broad, it's unbelievable," Pearce said.

On Friday, Switzerland, Japan, Sweden, South Korea and Brazil were leading in the mechatronics competition.

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