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Franchise fair hosted for Ford workers

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NORFOLK - A thin but steady trickle of Ford Norfolk Assembly Plant workers, some with wife and newborn or toddler in tow, walked through a cavernous company training center Wednesday looking for a future.

Instead of receiving instructions on how to install a part or build the latest-model truck, they came away with plastic bags full of franchise fliers and business cards.

"I'm hoping to go back to school with the buyout packages we are hoping to get, but at the same time I'm bracing for if we don't get them," said Paul Martin, 34, of Chesapeake, a chassis line worker.

In Michigan, the automaker's Board of Directors finishes a two-day meeting today to discuss the company's future. Some Ford workers here, meanwhile, spent the Wednesday of the first week of an extended furlough listening to franchisers' pitches on sub shops, sign-making businesses and religious jewelry and clothing stores.

Ford announced in April that it plans to close the sprawling plant on the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River in 2008. This week, the company began a furlough of a total of nine weeks for the rest of the year. When production occurs, workers will share one shift for six weeks.

Angie Haddock, 56, of Virginia Beach left a job as a medical records technician to work for Ford nearly four years ago. She spent time at the Go Fish Clothing & Jewelry Co. and SportClips tables.

"I'm kind of fishing around here," she said. "It's not the end of the world by any means. Life goes on. You just have to adjust."

Haddock was bemused by having to find a new job at this time in her life. She echoed the words of other auto workers who left previous careers, with less pay and benefits, for a Ford job paying much better.

She said she started crying Wednesday when she saw the buildings were dark. "Not for myself but for all the families here," she said of the idled plant.

Men and women who normally would either be on the factory floor assembling burly Ford F-150 trucks or running errands before going to work in the afternoon picked up career-planning surveys at the door.

Some sat down with job counselors; others browsed for business opportunities. About two dozen companies touted their franchises. Moving from table to table, the Ford workers listened attentively to the vendors as huge fans buzzed in the background.

Some of the franchises marketing their opportunities had fees of \$20,000 and \$165,000.

Franchise lawyer Stephen E. Story, a partner in Kaufman & Canoles' Norfolk office, gave out advice to Ford workers attending the event. Before plunging into a franchise agreement, people should do their homework and have a team of advisers that includes an accountant to help create a business plan and an experienced franchise lawyer to review the contract, he said.

A tall, easy going man with four children, ages 2 to 7, Paul Martin left a job as a Christian high school teacher and football coach about three years ago for the job security the plant once offered.

He and his father, Dave Martin, 65, also a Ford worker, attended the event to look into what it takes to buy a franchise that would allow the son to help support a family of six when he returns to college.

"I'm retiring," said the elder Martin, who has 36 years on the job. "He's got a future."

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