

Businesses invest in workforce development plans

BY LORE LAWRENCE

Business is experiencing a major shift in workforce development. Faced with a critical skill shortage and inadequate federal jobs programs, companies are turning to proactive partnerships with education, labor and local government to get the training programs they need.

"[There] has been a major philosophical change in how these programs are run," said Thomas T. Mooney, president of the Greater Rochester (N.Y.) Metro Chamber of Commerce. "The philosophical change is that the efforts now are determining where the jobs are, what employers' needs are ... what type of training is to be utilized to prepare employees for jobs that exist—not doing training just for the sake of training."

In Rochester, as in many other regions of the country, the change toward business-centered services has been fueled in part by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. Unlike previous job and job training programs, WIA exists to meet specific needs of both employers and job seekers and covers Americans of every economic status.

"I think in theory the Workforce Investment Act is a sound system," said Elizabeth Owens, manager of state affairs at the Society

for Human Resource Management (SHRM). "Not only does it target populations in need of basic skills training, it also provides assistance to people in need of other services and retraining. It consolidates a patchwork of programs, is easier to handle and use, and, I think, in some places has seen a very enthusiastic response."

Under WIA states are to develop a five-year strategic plan outlining workforce development goals and methods. Workforce Investment Boards (WIB), which guide a region's economic policy, are formed on both the state and local levels. By law, the majority of board members must be business leaders. Labor leaders also are included on the board.

"We think unions are important constituents within the public/private partnership. We can be part of high road partnerships, leading to good jobs, successful companies and strong communities," said Weezy Waldstein, acting director for public workforce and economic development systems at the AFL-CIO's Working For America Institute.

In addition to economic policy, WIBs also oversee local "one-stop career centers." More than 800 of these career centers across the country provide everything from core services, such

as job database access, to more intensive services, such as career assessment. For those who still have difficulty finding employment, training may be provided; that, however, is dependent upon the amount of funding available.

One advantage of one-stops, said Carl Van Horn, director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, is that employers can tap into a pool of qualified workers they might otherwise not have hired. A second advantage is that the cost of training is shared by the public sector, something companies otherwise would have to pay for themselves.

Due to a critical skill shortage and inadequate federal jobs programs, companies are forming partnerships to get the training programs they need.

The Heldrich Center formed a working partnership with Spherion Corp., a private company that specializes in work performance enhancement. Together they developed a new online product targeted to employment organizations such as one-stops. Careerplace-On-Line provides subscribing organizations such as one-stops with their own web site, complete with customizable content that connects people to career, training, employment, education and management tools.

In Rochester, the Rochester Resource Alliance Inc. (RRA) administers the WIB for Rochester and Monroe counties. With a budget of almost \$7 million expected to increase to \$12 million over the coming months, RRA has various classroom training programs and has enlisted local community colleges—vital to WIA training programs—to run their one-stop career centers. RRA's local economic survey showed there already were 1,400 available jobs in the Rochester region.

Mooney said that a WIB grant to Corning Inc. was a sound investment.

"Corning, the recipient of \$150,000, has made a private commitment of tens of millions of dollars (in capital plant equipment) and hired 440 people. ... We're now hearing this plant may double in size in the next several months," he said.

Other private/public partnerships predate WIA, but have become an invaluable resource for their local workforce investment board. Santa Monica Community College in Santa Monica, Calif., set up its Office of Workforce and Economic Development (OWED) in 1997. With funding from various federal, state and local grants, OWED has instituted a program that will train job seekers and meet the needs of Santa Monica businesses. In the past four years, OWED has spent \$7 million training 1,600 people and has forged relationships with over 400 businesses. It has its own one-stop center and sponsors job fairs that have drawn as many as 3,000 people.

OWED's director, Assistant Dean Elmer Bugg, attributes the program's success in part to the fact that his office works very closely with the Chamber of Commerce and local

councils and that the training OWED delivers is tailored to the needs of local businesses.

"I think we're always open to new experiences," Bugg said. "You can't go in with a boilerplate idea [about] what is going to be needed in the environment," added Bugg, who heads a staff of 24.

OWED also encouraged American Airlines to set up a training program at Santa Monica Airport, rather than have American send local job candidates to Dallas for the customary five weeks of training. This allowed the airline to hire candidates, such as single parents and those on public assistance, who would not have been able to leave the area.

"In addition to the training facility we've developed through our partnership, customized training also has been provided for us," said Roberta Sued, PHR, human resource representative for American's western regional office at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). Sued said that OWED used American's training staff to provide customer-service based workshops, which have been expanded and upgraded over time, for American's existing employees. Currently OWED also is providing ongoing post-employment PC applications training to American's employees at LAX.

In New Mexico, a private sector group, the Job Service Employer Council (JSEC), an advisor to the state department of labor, has been pursuing public/private partnerships aggressively for the past five years.

"We were pioneers ... the first to put in one-stop career centers. We had one of the first online (job services)," said R. Gregory Green, SPHR, chair of the Santa Fe JSEC. Green, a senior human resources consultant and a district director of SHRM's New Mexico State Council, said working to get local companies WIA funding has paid off.

"Last year, I was successful in getting \$500,000 in training monies for a brand-new company. Usually they have to have been in existence for three years to get funding. It created 1,500 jobs at a very high level," he said.

In the Midwest last year, Michigan's \$250 million employment program, Michigan Works!, was recognized as the most innovative workforce development system in the country by the National Alliance of Business. Michigan's 25 workforce development boards have educational advisory groups comprising educators and business people. The result: Business is able to directly affect educational policy on both a local and state level.

"The whole system is employer-led, which means employers are leading strategic initiatives never done before for the whole community," said Barbara Bolin, director of the Michigan Department of Career Development. Employers, she said, are in the "box seat" to influence economic development in their region.

Bolin added that by doing "environmental scans" of local economies throughout the state, workforce boards were in a better position to determine trends and do long-term strategic planning.

Michigan's system includes extensive online resources for students, job seekers and employers. Emphasizing lifelong learning, the program makes use of "WorkKeys"—job skill and profiling assessments by the Iowa-based SEE PARTNERSHIPS, PAGE 17

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Business-centered services on hand to help job seekers

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ACT educational testing service.

“WorkKeys allows educators and employers to talk to one another,” said Bolin, who noted that both sides use the same set of standards to determine skill aptitude. Another benefit of WorkKeys is that it makes students and job seekers aware of what kinds of jobs are out there and what skill sets are required for a particular career.

Michigan also has a Rapid Response Unit, which responds to word of impending layoffs by going out to the business and familiarizing workers with what services are available to them and possibly even getting them new placement. **HR**

Lore Lawrence is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.