

Eastern Connecticut worker-retraining done very capably

Jimmy Buffett, lamenting the unavailability of his pirate career choice, sings "Occupational hazard being, occupation's just not around." Today, the occupations for which people have trained or worked at for years just aren't around any longer. Outsourcing is a minor contributor to this issue, but a major cause cele-



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bre of politicians and pundits.

A major problem for workforce development is how to re-harness people displaced by job losses. Part of this problem is to predict which occupations will be in demand for the future.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, or ECWIB, under its able executive director, John Beauregard, has a reputation for doing a great job of both predicting and training our region's displaced workers.

That reputation is now being recognized nationally. At the Workforce Innovations 2004 conference this week in San Antonio, the ECWIB will receive a Recognition of Excellence Award from the Federal Employment and Training Administration. The award is for a Clinical Data Manager (CDM) training program that the ECWIB conducted from 2001 until last year. CDMs collect, store, and analyze the data for trials of new drugs — a critical and very high-tech job.

The ECWIB recognized that having a pool of workers skilled in this occupation could not only support the current Pfizer operations, but also provide incentive to attract companies that work for the pharmaceutical industry — economic development strategy allied with worker development.

The program itself is a unique blend of multi-media software, simulated work experiences, and workplace skills. My wife, Cynthia, a current board member of the ECWIB, is giving a paper on the program at the meeting. She, Armelde Pitre of Pfizer, and I, while at Eastern Connecticut State University, led the development of the program for the ECWIB.

Excellent program

While an excellent program, it really represents both the culmination of current workforce development philosophy and the recognition that new approaches are needed. The current approach is to identify jobs that need filling and train workers with the skills necessary. In times of rapid technological change, that can backfire.

In a different program, we trained many workers in the programming language, COBOL, to handle the Y2K problem; unfortunately, by the time they were ready, the need had gone away.

The ECWIB started the CDM program by recognizing that a formal curriculum program for CDMs was lacking and by envisioning the economic development impact that a highly qualified CDM-trained workforce could have.

Development and implementation of such a project would benefit the region and the state by producing potential employees for pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer, and creating a CDM talent pool to assist seCTer in recruiting and expanding the biotech cluster. This is part of the new paradigm: projecting industry needs and addressing them to promote economic development.

Even this approach doesn't go far enough. Meeting the needs of current industries, even proactively, only serves to stave off more job losses for the short run.

We need to look further ahead by tracking emerging

technologies and innovation trends.

Shift in thinking

To do this will require workforce development teams cognizant of what is happening in the research-and-development world as well as being skilled in training program development.

More importantly, it will require a fundamental shift in the mindset of those agencies that fund these projects. Currently, job-training funding, usually federal, is directed toward training un- or under-employed workers to fill already available jobs.

This is politically viable to quell the uproar over outsourcing, etc.; the CDM program was part of the effort to train American workers to take the place of non-citizens who were here on special employment visas.

The metrics used to evaluate success are as near-sighted as the current approach itself.

The criteria are usually how many people get hired within a short timeframe and how many dollars each placement costs. These are mandated by Congress, but today's philosophy won't solve the real problem of preparing the nation's workers to take advantage of the United States' unquestioned lead in creating new industries.

Even the Navy recognizes this need. The Chief of Naval Operations is planning a human capital strategy to meet future needs by developing a process to identify and train sailors specifically for the new ships and systems (VADM Harms, Hoewing, and Totushek, Sea Warrior: Maximizing Human Capital, Naval Institute Proceedings, June 2003).

Perhaps if they come up with the need for pirate skills in the future, Jimmy Buffett might even be enticed to leave Margaritaville.

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