

Region's employers need 'farm system'

The recent decision by the San Francisco Giants to extend their Player Development Contract with the Norwich Navigators got me thinking. When Navigators General Manager Keith Hallal described the current state of major league baseball, he described it this way, "(Organizations) are in a competitive industry and they're trying to get an edge, and if your players at the minor league level aren't able to develop quickly, you're at a disadvantage at the big league level."

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That assessment could just as easily describe the challenge faced by Eastern Connecticut's employers.

Simply described, a successful farm system invests in raw talent and places the future of its organization in the hands of coaches who run strong training programs. The goal of the farm team system is to develop this talent to create opportunities for motivated and qualified ball players to advance. Advance to a higher-level team. Advance in compensation level. Advance the team to a higher ranking.

Ultimately, the farm team system supports the advancement of the entire baseball industry.

This baseball analogy highlights similarities to the workforce challenges of Eastern Connecticut, in which an investment in the talent and skills is also necessary for our economic advancement.

This need has been obscured in the past few years by favorable employment trends, namely that our region has added 21,000 jobs over the past 10 years while the population increased 11,000, through the 2000 Census. The job growth has been outstanding, as it represents more than the other six Connecticut labor markets combined.

This has resulted in a lower regional unemployment rate. It has also forced numerous service industry employers to increase their schedule flexibility offered to workers in an attempt to accommodate workers who many times are taking on a second job in this tight labor market.

Employers have also hired an unprecedented level of newly arriving immigrant populations as well as workers from neighboring regions like Hartford and New Haven Counties to fill their supply need.

These dynamics provided relative job stability for the short-term. Compelling longer-term employment issues however still remain. The "exhausted" nature of our current supply will encounter steady challenges over the next several years as the skilled workers from our baby boomer set reach retirement age.

Filling skills gap not easy

Filling this skills gap will not be easy in the short run as employers now select from 27,000 fewer 18-34 year olds as compared to 1990 levels. To meet this challenge, Eastern Connecticut must take a page from the farm system approach to develop a competitive labor force for the long term. And here's how:

A farm-team system gives 100 percent of its prospects on-the-job training. Major league teams want "game-tested" players. Think of Eastern Connecticut employers as these teams. Of projected job openings for the region, 71.3 percent require on-the-job training or work experience. Our region must support this need with education and training programs that provide hands-on experiences to create a "win-win-win" scenario for employers, workers, and the region.

In a recent Clinical Data Manager Training Program supported by the Eastern Connecticut Work-

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force Investment Board, students received academic training taught by biotechnology industry experts followed by employer-offered internships to polish the skills of their "prospects."

Upon completion, many students were then hired by these same employers for an average wage of \$26 per hour. That's a grand slam for the worker, the employer, and the health-care industry base in our region. This "farm team" program was so successful that it earned a National Recognition of Excellence Award from the U.S. Department of Labor.

For our region's employers to remain competitive, we must build a successful workforce farm team system through vibrant partnerships with the educational establishment (high schools, higher education).

Workers of tomorrow must be trained and skilled in the economic growth areas.

The recent job growth has enabled our region to hit singles and doubles in the short-term. We must prepare to hit home runs by prudently investing in our farm team to enable future achievements in earnings and productivity for both individuals and employers.

That is the best way to guarantee Eastern Connecticut a World Series ring.

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