



Connecticut Economy Needs Strong, Well-Trained Workers

Connecticut Economy Needs Strong, Well-Trained Workers

By John Beauregard

Published on 5/11/2007 in [Home](#) » [Editorial](#) » [Perspective](#)

In the column titled "Losing good workers hurts businesses," published April 4, Day business editor Anthony Cronin stated, "If you're an employer in eastern Connecticut, you already realize that the local labor market is tight and good help can be hard to find."

Mr. Cronin's remarks accurately portray the thin and fragile nature of our available labor supply after more than a decade of job growth unmatched anywhere in the state.

Unless the state takes a more active position in training the workers of tomorrow, the challenge of finding adequately skilled employees will continue to increase. Without developing the talent of our workers, every resident in eastern Connecticut will feel the impact as the lack of "good help" restricts our economy.

State labor officials predict that by 2014, about 60 percent of our state's 20 fastest-growing occupations will require at least a bachelor's degree for entry-level employment. Contrast this with U.S. census data that shows 45 percent of New London County and 52 percent of Windham County residents 24 years or older lack postsecondary education. Employers already feel the crunch. A recent Connecticut Business and Industry Association survey reported that 60 percent of employers said that their employees need greater technical skills.

Supply can't meet demand

Time is not on our side. An aging work force raises the stakes even higher. The Connecticut Department of Labor projects through 2010 that job growth and voluntary retirement will yield more than 6,355 regional openings. Our eligible labor supply can't meet the demand for existing openings — especially in occupations that require advanced training. This pattern will intensify with the retirement of high-skilled baby boomers.

To address the challenge before us, we have to face two hard facts. First, our resources to solve this problem won't be coming from Washington. Currently, federal allocations fund training services to about 3 percent of the work force. Further, since 2002 the White House has proposed a cumulative 28 percent cut in key training programs and 72 percent in cuts for key Education Department adult and vocational education programs. With technology changing virtually every job at a record pace, the resources to adapt seem to be going in the opposite direction.

The second hard fact we must face is that hurdles must be negotiated if we are to maintain the work force quality that has become part and parcel of eastern Connecticut's legacy. These hurdles confront us at both the state and local level. For example, a state funding cap on adult education programs limits regional skillbuilding efforts for workers lacking a diploma and in need of further education.

Region's lower wages

For those holding a high school diploma, the fact that our region's average annual wage is \$12,000 less than the statewide average makes pursuing post-secondary education seem financially out of reach, especially for our low-income residents.

These facts don't paint the prettiest picture, at least right now. But these facts provide insight about how and where we can invest state resources to start a powerful chain reaction.

If made available, talented workers with industry-appropriate skills can fill current and projected job openings, leading to economic growth and an improved quality of life for many Connecticut families. Developing workforce talent creates a win-win situation for families, for employers, and for our state economy.

A mechanism to provide that training exists in "Raised Bill No. 7021." The Campaign for a Working Connecticut, a coalition of leading representatives from business, labor and education, has come together to address the skills challenge before our state with this comprehensive work-force training solution.

Raised Bill No. 7021 picked up strong support statewide because of a widening audience that recognizes the return on investment produced by a statewide work force training initiative.

Unfortunately, the Appropriation Committee's budget has funded only a few, select components of Raised Bill No. 7021.

High hopes for legislators

In the final weeks of this legislative session, as compromises are hammered out in the budget, I hope that legislators take a second look at the comprehensive strategies in Raised Bill No. 7021 and calculate the return on investment to our economy.

If they do, good help won't be so hard to find.

John Beauregard is executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board Inc. You can email him at beauregardj@ewib.org

Regional
