Second “Workforce Now” report released

Workforce Now is a regional research initiative to identify current and future talent requirements for the five counties of Southwest Florida. The initiative was created in October 2012 as an outcome of the Education Summit produced by The News-Press Media Group. It is envisioned as a systematic, strategic multi-year focus on understanding and meeting critical workforce needs.

The quality of the regional workforce is a primary competitive factor in the region’s ability to grow and prosper in a competitive global marketplace. The Workforce Now initiative is designed to provide better information on workforce gaps including skills and characteristics desired by regional employers. The plan is to deeply study industries or sectors each year to provide a continuous stream of information from employers to educational institutions, and to look for ways to create dialogue and new partnerships between businesses and educational institutions.

This is the second report generated by the regional Workforce Now initiative providing important information about employment gaps and skills desired by regional employers. It provides a summary of the information gained from a 17-question survey and panel discussions by 13 executives representing three key business sectors: 1) Financial/Insurance/Banking, 2) Construction/Manufacturing and 3) Tourism/Hospitality.

Each company told its story of workforce gaps and needs today and what it forecasts for the next several years at a Workforce Now Forum held on March 19, at Edison State College. Regional educational institutions were invited to hear a panel discussion on workforce gaps and skills.

Overall Findings
Common themes were that regulation and technology are changing the way companies do business and requiring workers to acquire new skills and knowledge to be competitive in the workplace. Information technology applications are becoming much more common combining old world craftsmanship with 21st century technology. All the employers indicated a need for continuous learning; good written and oral communication skills; basic computer and business mathematics skills; critical thinking and problem solving skills; and the interest in and ability to work on a team.

Financial Sector Needs
The financial business sector indicated that the rules of operation have changed with new legislation and regulations. Technology is also changing the way the financial sector interfaces with customers, requiring internet-based banking and applications for mobile devices. The employment gaps identified for the financial sector were in compliance and regulatory areas as well as information technology areas. The skills/knowledge/traits needed to be successful in the Finance/Insurance/Banking business sector were identified as:

• A working knowledge of tax laws
• Decision-making abilities
• Business and financial analysis abilities
• Critical thinking skills
• Ethical behavior
• Knowledge of finance and accounting principles and regulations
• Ability to persuade others
• Time management skills
• Written and oral communication skills

Construction/Manufacturing Sector Needs
The construction/manufacturing business sector indicated that new information technologies are reshaping their businesses. Laptop computers, tablets, and smartphones are becoming a part of worker scheduling, building maintenance, the parts-ordering process, and monitoring advanced building climate controls. Advanced CNC and robotic machines are becoming more common and allow a higher quality product while increasing flexibility of the design as well as response time. The companies spoke of the need for “old world craftsmanship” with 21st century technology.

The employment gaps identified for the construction/manufacturing sector were drafter/engineers, certified welders, service technicians, control technicians, computer-aided designers (CAD) and computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) operators and programmers, CNC 5-axis mill operators, sales engineers, production supervisors, and controllers. The overall skills that the Construction/Manufacturing business sector would like to see are:

• Ability to read 2D and 3D drawings
• CNC robot and machine skills
• Communication skills
• Critical thinking abilities

Tourism/Hospitality Sector Needs
The companies in this sector also indicated that new communication technology such as social media applications and searchable websites were changing the way they do business and communicate with customers. Technology is allowing the business sector to target specific groups of households. There is concern that new regulations including health care and immigration may limit the employee pool or significantly raise operating costs. The hard-to-fill or critical positions identified by this business sector included entry-level employees such as room attendants, hostess, food servers, cooks, and guest service agents. This group indicated that graphic artists are important along with Coast Guard certified boat captains. They also indicated that management and marketing staff are needed. Independent of the specific positions available in Tourism/Hospitality, the business sector group wanted each potential employee to have better:

• Ability to read social cues
• Business mathematics skills
• Communication skills
• Conflict resolution skills
• Creative thinking skills
• Organizational skills
• Problem solving skills

The next steps
Future research for 2013 includes interviews with key educational leaders and an online survey of educators in the next few weeks to better understand their sources of workforce information, the value of the Workforce Now studies, and any impediments that limit their ability to meet regional workforce needs and skill sets.

An annual assessment of the overall workforce gaps and skills is planned for this summer to support the overall project and help to target future research. In addition, a regional Workforce Now Summit to report on this year’s study findings will take place October 29, 2013.

This new Southwest Florida workforce research initiative has brought together researchers from three of the leading regional higher educational institutions to better understand employer workforce requirements: Florida Gulf Coast University, Edison State College, and Hodges University.

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