



NARROWING THE SKILLS GAP

A REGIONAL WORKFORCE INITIATIVE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


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Thank you to the Steering Committee members for their service and participation. Also thank you to Edna Perkins for her efforts in facilitating the employer focus groups. Additional thanks to Workforce Resource, Inc. for its support of the regional occupation survey.

Special thanks to Mary Jo Van Gompel, Pat Trowbridge, Angie Niska, Becky Seelen, and Mari Kay-Nabozny for their work in developing and editing this report.

The EDC facilitated this effort in response to needs expressed by area employers during business retention visits. The EDC is not the solution to this effort; however, it hopes that this report's recommendations will lead to actions to narrow the regional skills gap.

Sincerely,


Brian Doudna, Study Facilitator

STEERING COMMITTEE

Name	Organization
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Dave Benedict	Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development – Trade Adjustment Assistance
Patty Chambers	Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, WESTconsin Credit Union
Joan Coffman	St. Joseph's Hospital
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Pat Trowbridge	Eau Claire Area Economic Development Corporation
MaryJo VanGompel	Literacy Volunteers of the Chippewa Valley
Roxann Vanderwyst	Chippewa Valley Technical College

PROJECT PARTNERS

- **Area educational institutions:** University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, Chippewa Valley Technical College, Eau Claire Area School District, School District of Altoona, and CESA 10
- **Area employers** from healthcare, service, manufacturing, and technology sectors
- **Businesses organizations:** Chippewa Valley Society for Human Resource Management (CVSHRM), Chippewa County Economic Development Corporation, Dunn County Economic Development Corporation, Greater Menomonie Area Chamber of Commerce, Chippewa Falls Area Chamber of Commerce, and Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce
- **Government:** City of Eau Claire and Eau Claire County
- **Workforce agencies:** Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Workforce Resource, Inc., Job Center of Wisconsin, and Dislocated Workers Program
- **Non-profits:** United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley, Junior Achievement of Wisconsin, and Literacy Volunteers of the Chippewa Valley

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past year, organizations across the public and private sectors worked together to conduct this study. The Eau Claire Area Economic Development Corporation (EDC) facilitated this effort with the objective of understanding how the skills and education of the area's workforce match up to the staffing needs of regional employers. Though the workforce is talented and area institutions provide high-quality education, there is a fundamental gap between the skills of the workforce and employers' needs. This gap is known as "the skills gap."

OBJECTIVES

The goal of this report is to make public the recommendations from the Steering Committee to create a better prepared workforce. This report does not duplicate Tim Sullivan's report, "The Road Ahead: Restoring Wisconsin's Workforce Development" or Competitive Wisconsin Inc.'s "Be Bold 2" study. This report will:

- Communicate key findings and set the stage for partnerships that will build a workforce that is able to adapt to the evolving skill requirements of regional employers.
- Provide local community and business leaders with suggestions on how their organizations could play a role in moving recommendations forward.
- Position regional organizations to effectively utilize new state programs and initiatives to benefit local workforce development efforts.

METHODOLOGY

This collaborative effort included two components:

1. Regional market research consisting of focus groups and an employer survey
2. Formation of the Steering Committee to develop actionable and measurable recommendations to address gaps in workforce development efforts

Data collected through the employer survey was insufficient to provide specific, data-driven recommendations due to low participation. However, the Steering Committee and workforce development agencies provided united anecdotal evidence from daily work experience. Further, the Steering Committee was able to open lines of communication that will benefit future efforts.

KEY FINDINGS

Through this study, the Steering Committee identified a common theme—a need for enhanced communication. The systems to support educational attainment necessary to narrow the skills gap are in existence. The challenge

is coordinating efforts so that these systems are fully utilized. Four key findings were identified:

1. Individuals entering the workforce do not necessarily possess critical skills.
2. Local labor market information and trends are not easily accessible to consumers of education.
3. Communication, coordination of information, and outreach efforts are not aligned to effectively address the skills gap.
4. Targeted resources are needed to support efforts to narrow the skills gap.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report outlines five recommendations to begin addressing the key findings.

1. Gather timely local labor market information.
2. Communicate local labor market information based on the data generated in recommendation 1.
3. Reduce educational and training barriers for students with economic challenges.
4. Develop a regional strategy to recruit individuals trained in disciplines not available through area educational institutions.
5. Address outreach barriers impacting placement of students and adults in career exploration and work experiences.

Participation by organizations—such as the following—will be critical to leverage resources that narrow the skills gap:

- Employers
- Workforce development agencies
- Education institutions
- Economic development corporations
- Chambers of commerce
- Chippewa Valley Society for Human Resource Management (CVSHRM)

BACKGROUND

While there are many individuals looking for jobs, area employers are having difficulty finding qualified employees to fill specialized positions.

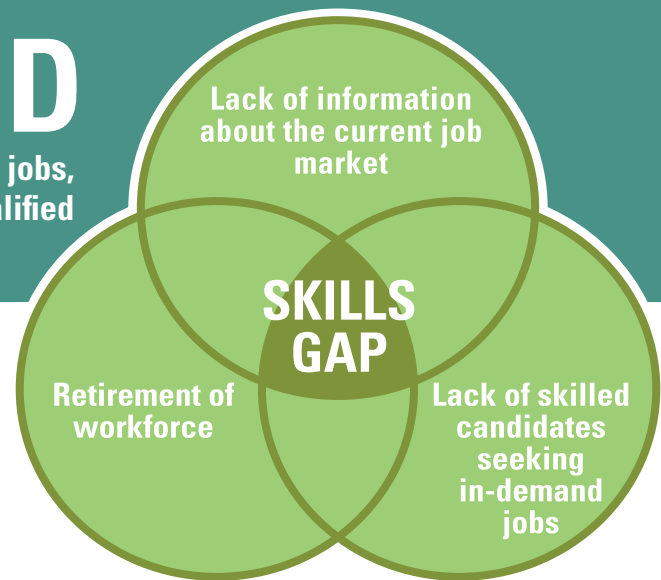
Economic activity is starting to rebound after the Great Recession. Nationally, employers are creating jobs at a slower pace than in previous economic recoveries.¹ Unemployment rates in the region are relatively low. In July 2013, the unemployment rate in the Eau Claire MSA was 6.0 percent² compared to the national rate of 7.3 percent.³

Based on the results of the focus groups, regional employers are struggling to fill existing positions for in-demand occupations. However, many individuals struggle to find positions for which they are qualified. Therefore, while there are individuals looking for jobs, regional employers continue to have difficulty finding qualified employees to fill specialized positions.

Further, there are concerns about workforce trends. Baby Boomers are quickly approaching retirement age and employers are concerned about losing their experience, skills, and wealth of industry knowledge. Students, parents, and dislocated workers have a difficult time finding information about the ever-changing regional job market and what will be the most viable careers.

When these factors are combined, the result is a troubling gap between our workforce supply and the needs of local businesses—the skills gap.

Some reports such as those published by the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee⁴ and the University of Wisconsin–Madison⁵ have claimed that the skills gap does not exist. Although that debate will continue and this report will not address it, the Steering Committee confirmed confusion and frustration among individuals in the workforce, consumers of education, and businesses. Opportunities exist for improving outcomes for all parties involved.



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s 2013-2015 budget has earmarked \$100 million to the Department of Workforce Development to implement the Wisconsin Fast Forward Program. This program includes funding to develop a cutting-edge labor market information system to help individuals make more informed educational buying decisions related to career paths. An additional \$15 million is allocated to provide employer-focused worker training grants and establish the Office of Skills Development (OSD) at the Department of Workforce Development to manage the grant program.

By examining these issues locally, we will position the region to maximize the potential for garnering state and local resources to address regional workforce challenges.

1. Loreta J. Mester and Elif Sen, “Has Job Quality Ben ‘Job One’ in the Economic Recovery?” Research Rap Special Report, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, August 14, 2013.
2. “Unemployment Rates for Metropolitan Areas,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2013.
3. Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2013.
4. Marc V. Levine, “The Skills Gap and Unemployment in Wisconsin: Separating Fact from Fiction,” University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Center for Economic Development Working Paper, February 2013.
5. Jennifer Cunha, Megan Loritz, Ben Nerad, and Phil Sletten, “Examining the Skills Gap in Wisconsin,” University of Wisconsin–Madison, Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs, Spring 2013.

THE CASE FOR PARTNERING IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

By 2020, 37.3 percent of the region's workforce will be at retirement age (55 years and older).¹ Nationally, employers report hiring substantial numbers of new entrants who are poorly prepared, requiring additional company investment to improve workforce readiness skills.

The skills gap survey conducted as part of this study was not able to validate this finding due to low participation. However, the Steering Committee and workforce development agencies provided united anecdotal evidence from their daily work experience that support this as a regional trend.

While employers are able to provide remedial or on-the-job training, 74 percent of regional businesses have less than 20 employees.² These small businesses do not typically have the resources to independently contract for customized labor training. To fill critical talent needs, these companies rely on individuals who come prepared with critical skills. To build this quality workforce, businesses, educational institutions, and workforce development agencies need to communicate to identify needs and coordinate consortium-based implementation efforts.

1. "Wisconsin Population & Household Projections," State of Wisconsin Department of Administration, Demographic Services Center, 2008.

2. "Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages," Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4th Quarter, 2012.

KEY FINDINGS

There were many areas of opportunity that emerged from this study. The Steering Committee summarized its learnings into four key findings focused on skills, access to information, communication, and resources.

The systems needed to address the key findings and to narrow the skills gap are largely in place. Coordinating across systems to fully utilize existing assets and to secure additional resources must be a focus.

Another valuable insight from this study is the list of occupations most commonly identified as difficult to recruit for: CNC machine operators, computer programmers, diesel technicians, engineers (mechanical and electrical), health care procedure coders, information systems, nursing, and welders.

- 1 Individuals entering the workforce do not necessarily possess critical skills.
- 2 Local labor market information and trends are not easily accessible to consumers of education.
- 3 Communication, coordination of information, and outreach efforts are not aligned to effectively address the skills gap.
- 4 Targeted resources are needed to support efforts to narrow the skills gap.

KEY FINDING

Individuals entering the workforce do not necessarily possess critical skills.

The EDC brought together several focus groups comprised of individuals from regional industry sectors to identify key occupations and skills that employers are requiring in those occupations. The focus groups included business leaders, union members, and human resource professionals with a total of 30 businesses represented. Each group was facilitated by Edna Perkins, an experienced human resources manager.

When asked “What are the skills that you are looking for in a new employee?” the groups developed nearly identical lists. After consulting with educational partners, the lists were grouped into two categories: Core Skills and Employability Skills.

Through this research, the Steering Committee concluded that the majority of applied skills, such as those taught in degree and certification programs, are aligned with employers’ expectations. However, based on the employer focus groups, individuals entering the workplace today may not have obtained all of these core and employability skills. For students to learn critical skills in high school, partnerships with business and industry are an essential component of the educational process.

CORE SKILLS

Core skills are normally acquired in school and, for the most part, are the core academic subjects identified by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s Agenda 2017: Every Child College and Career Ready. The following items identified by the focus groups are considered core skills:

- Writing in English
- Strong math skills
- Strong reading comprehension
- Comfortable/competent use of information technology
- Strong written and verbal communication

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Employability skills enable a new employee to use knowledge acquired in school to perform in the workplace. Employability skills include those based on cognitive abilities as well as more social and emotional skills. The following items identified by the focus groups are considered employability skills:

- Strong interpersonal skills
- Customer service skills
- Strong critical and independent thinking
- Problem solving
- Demonstrate creativity/innovation
- Leadership – ability to use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others
- Professional behavior
- Ability to work in a diverse workplace
- Dependable
- Safety conscious
- Team player
- Adaptable to change/flexible
- Take ownership/initiative
- Apply knowledge
- Maintain composure under pressure
- Strong work ethic



**KEY
FINDING**

Local labor market information and trends are not easily accessible to consumers of education.

While there is an abundance of workforce-related data available at the state level, its usefulness in addressing the regional skills gap is limited. Local information cannot be extrapolated from existing state data, especially related to short-term demand and retirement trends within a given occupation.

Individuals need this information to make sound education and career decisions within this region. Workforce agencies need this information to support dislocated workers and apply for grants that can benefit the region. Educational institutions can use this information in student recruitment and curriculum planning. Businesses benefit from a larger pool of skilled job applicants.



**KEY
FINDING**

Communication, coordination of information, and outreach efforts are not aligned to effectively address the skills gap.

Communication and interaction between agencies, educators, parents, and businesses are major difficulties in narrowing the skills gap. The challenge for the business community is the ability to communicate with a unified voice to educational institutions regarding critical workforce skills. Employers should also be more active in communicating and distributing information to assist in creating the workforce needed to grow their companies. Sharing data, communicating skill expectations, and engaging with students, parents, teachers, and workforce agencies will be a vital part of meeting future talent requirements.



**KEY
FINDING**

Targeted resources are needed to support efforts to narrow the skills gap.

A major barrier to addressing this study's findings is lack of resources. This report identifies partners and estimates out-of-pocket resources needed to advance each recommendation.

In order to obtain resources to address the skills gap, the workforce development and education strategy must include strengthening and creating partnerships with the business community. Outcomes of such partnerships include: expanded training and educational programs for critical skill development or career pathways, coordinated recruiting efforts for key occupations, and distribution of information about the local labor market and related opportunities.

& RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION PLANS

The Steering Committee developed five recommendations to address the key findings.

- 1 Gather timely local labor market information.
- 2 Communicate local labor market information based on the data generated in recommendation 1.
- 3 Reduce educational and training barriers for students with economic challenges.
- 4 Develop a regional strategy to recruit individuals trained in disciplines not available through area educational institutions.
- 5 Address outreach barriers impacting placement of students and adults in career exploration and work experiences.

IMPLEMENTATION

Participation by organizations—such as the following—will be critical to leverage resources that narrow the skills gap:

- Employers
- Workforce development agencies
- Education institutions
- Economic development corporations
- Chambers of commerce
- Chippewa Valley Society for Human Resource Management (CVSHRM)

OVERSIGHT

A monitoring task force will continue to meet as part of the next phase in this initiative. This group will monitor progress and support the workgroups in addressing barriers to success.

"I applaud the Eau Claire regional workforce initiative for recognizing and acting on the need to collaborate with both private and public sectors to address regional talent. Their efforts demonstrate a strong, forward-thinking commitment to their communities and youth. "

Robin Kroyer-Kubicek, DPI
Career Pathways Consultant

Gather timely local labor market information.

(Addresses findings 2 & 4)

"First Supply employees do not necessarily come from specific degree programs and our turnover is very minimal. We will experience a large turnover in the next five to ten years as many of our long-term employees retire. Recommendation 1 would keep the public, job seekers, students, educators, and agencies informed about what employers need in the current and future workforce."

John Kohlhepp, General Manager—First Supply, LLC

CURRENT ISSUE

Local labor market information cannot be extrapolated from existing data, especially related to short-term demand and retirement trends within a given occupation.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

There is a great deal of data available at the federal level and new tools in development at the state level; however, significant gaps in regional labor market data will continue. For regional organizations to make informed resource allocation decisions, local occupational data is vital.

PROJECT LEAD

Scott Hodek—Regional Labor Economist, Wisconsin Office of Economic Advisors, CVSHRM, Manufacturing Works, and Workforce Resource, Inc.

SUPPORTING PARTNERS

Economic development corporations, Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, chambers of commerce, and educational institutions

FUNDING REQUIREMENT

\$5,000 annually

MEASUREMENTS

- Gather local data that fills existing gaps in federal and state reports
- Number of employers that participate
- Number of organizations that use the data to accomplish objectives

ACTION PLAN

1. Gather local data on key occupations. For each key occupation, inquire on:
 - Current number of employees
 - Current number of open positions
 - Level of education and/or certifications desired
 - Number of employees hired in the last 12 months
 - Projected change in the number of positions over the next 2 years
 - Projected number of retirements within the next 5 years
2. Interpret data collected in step 1.

"At the nationwide level, there is a wealth of information on everything from projected skill needs to occupational demand. As we narrow that geography to local and regional levels, many of those resources disappear. If we want the data necessary for businesses, educators, local government, and others to make informed choices that impact the local skills gap, we'll need to gather it ourselves."

Scott Hodek, Regional Labor Economist—Wisconsin Office of Economic Advisors

Communicate local labor market information based on the data generated in recommendation 1. (Addresses finding 2)

"It is clear that much of what needs to be accomplished in this workforce initiative is about 'communication.' Collecting and sharing pertinent workforce data will allow employers to convey their evolving workforce needs and can be used to adjust curriculum on any level of education. Whether you are a student, a dislocated worker, an individual making a career change (or counseling an individual who is doing so) this information will help identify current workforce opportunities and...choices. 'Narrowing the Skills Gap' is about determining where the jobs will be and providing a road map on how to successfully make the journey. Working together, we can make this happen."

Colleen Bates, Eau Claire County Board of Supervisors, CVTC District Board, West Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board

CURRENT ISSUE

There is limited or no access to regional information about key occupations. It will be critical to communicate this information in an effective manner so that it is actionable.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The data gathered in recommendation 1 must be communicated to key partners and audiences so that each can take appropriate action towards narrowing the skills gap. Individuals need this information to make sound education and career decisions. Workforce agencies need this information to support dislocated workers and to apply for grants. Educational institutions can use it for curriculum planning, marketing and enhancing course catalogs. Businesses can use the information in employee recruitment efforts and will benefit from a larger pool of skilled job applicants.

PROJECT LEAD

Eau Claire Area Economic Development Corporation, educational institutions, and Manufacturing Works

SUPPORTING PARTNERS

School district(s), employers of target occupations, and workforce development agencies

FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

- \$50,000 outreach budget
- In-kind marketing and graphic design support

MEASUREMENTS

- Participation levels in specific degree and certificate programs tied to key occupations
- Applications to programs related to key occupations
- Number of open positions in key occupations
- Amount of grant funds awarded to provide direct training to individuals for key occupations

ACTION PLAN

1. Create a framework for sharing local occupational information:
 - Regional wages
 - Companies that hire occupation
 - Regional statistics on: current number of jobs, future projections and retirements
 - Skills and degree requirements
 - Degrees and certifications available
 - Cost of education and degree programs
 - Regional education providers
2. Distribute this information through multiple channels to increase access and awareness. Channels should include:
 - Summary report
 - Press releases and media coverage
 - Educational institutions' program information and course catalogs
 - Communication channels utilized by educational institutions, workforce development agencies and local employers
 - Targeted marketing campaigns to dislocated workers, parents, and others

3

Reduce educational and training barriers for students with economic challenges.

(Addresses findings 3 & 4)

CURRENT ISSUE

Many individuals who are strong candidates for degree and certificate programs related to key occupations face barriers to pursuing these programs. The nature of these barriers include family responsibilities, transportation, living expenses, and more.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Assisting strong candidates in overcoming barriers to education can significantly increase their success rates in degree and certificate programs. These residents can, then, improve their quality of life, contributing to the well-being of the region overall. Further, increasing the success rate of training programs quickly grows the pool of skilled workers for local employers.

PROJECT LEAD

United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley

SUPPORTING PARTNERS

Chippewa Valley Technical College and potential business service providers

MEASUREMENT

- Certification and degree completion rates and change in household incomes of participants receiving microgrants

ACTION PLAN

One initiative underway is the development of microgrants for individuals entering an educational program or obtaining employment related to a key occupation. Microgrants can apply to tuition and barriers such as child care and transportation related expenses.

“Chippewa Valley Technical College prepares the workforce for this region. 69 percent of our graduates secure employment in the Chippewa Valley after graduation. Roughly 30 percent of our incoming students have distracting financial problems that hinder their educational studies; many of whom are not eligible for traditional financial aid. Specialized microgrant programs can alleviate short-term financial burdens, allowing students to finish their certificate or degree program. This support can provide a financial bridge to a better future for our students.”

Margo Keys, Ph.D. Vice
President Student Services—CVTC

4

Develop a regional strategy to recruit individuals trained in disciplines not available through area educational institutions.

(Addresses finding 3)

CURRENT ISSUE

One root cause of the skills gap is that degree and certification programs are not available locally for certain key occupations. An example of this is electrical engineering. The result is local employers left trying to fill positions by recruiting individuals from other geographies. This can be a large undertaking involving significant expense with a low rate of success.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

By building brand equity for the region among target audiences, businesses will have more success recruiting critical talent. A coordinated effort among businesses that need critical talent will be more efficient and effective than having each business go it alone.

PROJECT LEAD – NEAR TERM

Momentum West

PROJECT LEAD – LONG TERM

Western Wisconsin educational institutions

SUPPORTING PARTNERS

Economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, staffing agencies, CVSHRM, and local companies in need of importing critical talent

FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

To be determined by employers recruiting specific occupations

MEASUREMENTS

- Number of outreach activities made to educational institutions out-of-market
- Number of resumes or leads collected through out-of-market initiatives

ACTION PLAN – NEAR TERM

Engage local employers and employment agencies to develop a regional recruitment strategy to address specific critical talent needs. This effort should focus on recruiting individuals with education and training in disciplines that are not available at local institutions.

ACTION PLAN – LONG TERM

Bring engineering-related curriculum to universities in western Wisconsin.

“Accu-Tech Plastics exports products across the world, but we have a low profile in the Chippewa Valley. As a company, we have a tough time recruiting mechanical engineers into the area. Knowing the best avenues to recruit this talent and increasing our region’s ability to attract this talent is vital to growing our company.”

Tom Skrtic, Co-Owner—
Accu-Tech Plastics, Inc.

5

Address outreach barriers impacting placement of students and adults in career exploration and work experiences. (Addresses finding 1)

“As we look to expand work-based learning opportunities for our students, connecting with employers through a data-rich website would be very beneficial. In addition, enhancing the site so that students can express interest in potential internships would allow me to better support students and families in making informed decisions.”

Kristan Motszko, School to Careers Coordinator—Eau Claire Area School District

CURRENT ISSUE

Many students seek to explore careers while in high school or when entering a degree or certificate program. Unfortunately, students and educational institutions face barriers in securing these positions. The Pk–12 system and workforce agencies have staff dedicated to implementing outreach. However, placement is low due to the business community’s lack of awareness of programs, ability to provide opportunities for students, and agencies’ abilities to maintain employer contacts by placement activity.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Assisting students in learning about the real world of work is vital to them finding a pathway of interest early in their career exploration.

PROJECT LEAD

Economic development corporations, CVSHRM, school districts, and CESA 10

SUPPORTING PARTNERS

Chambers of commerce, educational institutions, and Manufacturing Works

FUNDING REQUIREMENT

\$3,000 annually

MEASUREMENTS

- Number of businesses listed in the database to participate in programming
- Number of work experience placements

ACTION PLAN

1. Create a relationship management website that allows business, education, and workforce partners to update contact information and program offerings regularly. The site will become a placement tool for high schools seeking to place students in work-based learning experiences.
2. Economic development organizations should incorporate this website in their annual communications to employers.
3. Enhance the website by creating additional partnerships with CVSHRM and other organizations to increase utilization and connection to area businesses.
4. Employers and educational institutions need to coordinate marketing efforts to communicate skill expectations to area residents:
 - Implement a coordinated media relations and marketing strategy tied to specific occupations prior to spring and fall enrollment
 - Create an occupations web page and a pamphlet for distribution throughout the area containing information about resources available to job seekers.

BUSINESS CHECKLIST

ADDRESSING YOUR SKILLS GAP

Each business can play a role in narrowing the skills gap. To the right is a quick reference of ways that businesses can contribute.

(Grades 4–12) Working to Build Your Future Workforce

- Communicate talent needs to educators related to specific occupations.
- Become a partner in work experience programs with your area Pk–12 school district.
- Provide tours to schools, agencies and the media to communicate about careers.
- When launched, use relationship management website.
- Sponsor internships, job shadowing, mentoring and other learning experiences to increase young people’s workplace skills.
- Offer a company representative to serve on the monitoring task force for future phases of this report or on a curriculum advisory committee with your local school district.
- Publicize your involvement in the above programs in employee and community newsletters, and with the media.

Educating Potential Applicants about Your Company’s Opportunities & Expectations

- Use your website to communicate skills and competencies that are required of employees.
- Be sure to include education and skill requirements for each position posted on your company website.
- Provide links to educational institution’s programs.
- Consider joint marketing efforts with educational institutions to recruit for degree programs that match hard-to-fill positions.
- Consider allowing your company’s logo to be used on degree program recruitment materials.

Recruitment

- Join a recruitment consortium for a specific occupation.
- Provide general feedback with links to local training programs in emailed rejection letters to applicants.
- Consider offering part-time employment for in-demand occupations to increase flexibility of the positions.

