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Sector initiatives help job seekers

By PAUL GRASSO, *In Perspective*

— Not so long ago, having a high-school diploma was sufficient to get a job that paid a livable wage and provided benefits and a pension.

Not so long ago, a person could spend their entire working career with one company or in one occupation.

Not so long ago, I had a full head of hair.

I have friends who made a decent living working 30 years with the same company. They have a comfortable retirement, and they have only their high-school diploma and training offered by their employer.

Unfortunately, those credentials, which were once a passport to the middle class, are no longer sufficient to find and keep steady employment. In fact, seventy-five percent of workers earning a less than sustainable wage have a high-school diploma. A survey by the California State Chamber of Commerce revealed that many California employers did not view a high-school diploma as an indicator of academic achievement, but as a demonstration that the recipient was willing to "stick it out."

If you look at the data, you will find that even with the unemployment rate hovering above 9 percent, many employers are struggling to find employees with the right mix of skills.

At times, it seems counter-intuitive. People are unemployed, employers need workers, what's the problem?

The problem is that the U.S. and the workplace have changed -- and changed significantly. Workplace demographics have changed, the use of technology has grown exponentially, the marketplace is global, and work itself has restructured.

What hasn't changed as dramatically is the way we prepare people for the world of work.

Nationally, a survey conducted by the National Manufacturing Association found that more than 80 percent of employers reported having trouble finding qualified employees. Conversely, jobseekers without specialized skills are finding it harder to access jobs that pay enough to make ends meet.

Locally, at the Plattsburgh OneWorksource Center, they have jobs that have been posted for months, they have a long list of people out of work, and they have what many parts of the country have -- a persistent skills gap, especially in industries such as healthcare and advanced manufacturing.

Other career centers around the state and the nation face a similar challenge -- matching people with the right mix of skills with employers who are desperately searching for them.

It's a challenge we're going to have to meet if we want our local economy to grow and our residents to prosper.

So, what are we to do?

One answer (and this isn't a problem that has only one answer) may lie in an initiative that began over 20 years ago but has recently started to gain traction. Sector employment initiatives have emerged as an innovative workforce development methodology to create training programs specific to individual industries; training programs that prepare unemployed and under-skilled workers for skilled positions; and then connect them with employers seeking to fill vacant positions.

A sector initiative is a regional, industry-focused approach to workforce and economic development. Sector initiatives improve access to good jobs and/or increase job quality in ways that strengthen an industry's workforce.

A National Governors' Association report, *State Sector Strategies: Regional Solutions to Worker and Employer Needs*, states that sector initiatives have four defining characteristics. According to the report, sector strategies:

1. Focus intensively on a specific industry over a sustained period, customizing solutions for multiple employers within a regional labor market.
2. Strengthen economic growth and industry competitiveness by creating new pathways into targeted industries and toward good jobs and careers. This approach benefits low-income individuals and it sustains and creates middle-class jobs.
3. Utilize workforce intermediaries, organizations that have a deep understanding of worker and employer issues in an industry and within a regional labor market. These organizations facilitate the many stakeholders involved to develop and implement industry-based workforce solutions.
4. Promote systemic change that achieves benefits for the industry, workers, and the community.

Sectoral initiatives accomplish this by focusing on specific industries, with their common occupations and skill requirements. This allows sector initiatives to develop greater understanding of workers and employers allowing workforce intermediaries to reach out to employers.

Ultimately, the goal of a sector initiative is to convene, connect and commit employers, educators, economic developers, workforce-development professionals and jobseekers.

The reason that sector initiatives have the potential to shape demand-side practices of workforce and economic development is because, by design, they engage with businesses around current and future workforce needs. Traditional workforce-development approaches focus primarily on the individual job seeker. A sector approach makes employers a primary customer of their efforts.

Sector initiatives aren't without critics. Some people bristle at the concept of the employer as the primary customer, but at the end of the day, an employer isn't going to hire someone who doesn't meet their needs. And what better way to learn about those needs than to ask an employer what it is they want?

I believe that if we can understand what employers need, we can then address the needs of job seekers by creating formal career paths to good jobs, reducing barriers to employment, and sustaining or increasing middle-class jobs.

Sector strategies work. An Aspen Institute study found that workers in sector-based programs saw their median personal earnings rise from \$8,580 to \$14,040 one year after training and \$17,732 after two years.

Fortunately, sector initiatives aren't something new to the North Country. For the past three years, Garry Douglas and Susan Matton at the Plattsburgh-North Country Chamber of Commerce have been recipients of funding from the New York State Department of Labor that funds their Regional Economic Transformation Strategies program focused on the aviation/aerospace and transportation-equipment manufacturing sectors. Beneficiaries of the program, known locally by its state funding designation, 13N, are the Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute, Clinton Community College, SUNY Plattsburgh

and the North Country Workforce Partnership. Each is working in their own way, in a different sector, to develop training programs in growth occupations.

It's one of the beauties of the sector-initiative approach. Sector initiatives are not "cookie cutter." Designed properly, they use a variety of customized strategies specific to the regional economy, industry sectors and worker populations.

The challenge now is to build upon that work so that we can fulfill employers' needs for skilled employees, which will enable us to help job seekers improve their income, benefits and employment opportunities.

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