

How upgrading workers' skills can create new jobs

Washington state is already working on making that happen in the health-care field, and the concept can apply in other areas.

By Eleni Papadakis

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With over 300,000 Washingtonians unemployed and looking for work, no job should go unfilled. Yet our recent statewide employer survey of employers found that 6 percent of employers had such a hard time finding qualified applicants they ended up leaving the job vacant.

While 6 percent may not sound like much (and is certainly down from previous years), that percentage translates to almost 11,000 employers statewide who were unable to fill at least one job opening. Over 15,000 employers are estimated to have suffered lower productivity over the past year because of difficulty finding the right skill sets.

The Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board) routinely identifies high demand fields and works with our education and training system to ensure Washingtonians have the talent for the jobs available. This is important work, but there's an additional promising approach that not only helps employers fill jobs, but can generate new openings at the same time

Every day, entry-level or semi-skilled employees go to work and do their job well. Employers should consider investing in and promoting their own proven entry-level employees to positions that often go unfilled for lack of qualified applicant. By upskilling current employees with the training they need to occupy an open position, employers reward a valuable employee and potentially create jobs that can be backfilled by entry-level applicants. Yet, a worker holding down one job faces challenges when learning the skills to do another job.

Washington has a leg up on perfecting this grow-your-own strategy because of work done in the health care field. Over a dozen hospitals and medical centers throughout the state (including Evergreen Hospital in Kirkland, Swedish/Edmonds, and Northwest Hospital in Seattle) have partnered with organized labor and their local community colleges to provide a way for current, entry-level employees to earn credentials for higher skilled, better paying jobs.

These employers, in partnership with their unions, are allowing for alternative work hours, providing onsite mentors, and offering stipends to offset wages lost while in class. Community colleges are helping with more online instruction and other measures that make it easier for a worker to re-enter the classroom.

The health care industry is embracing this upskill and backfill strategy because their field is one of the fastest growing areas for job creation. The latest state Skill Gap Analysis forecasts a 25 percent shortfall in supply of registered nurses between 2012 and 2017, as well as significant shortages in physical therapists, mental health counselors, occupational therapists, and medical and clinical lab technicians.

Health care is also a field where workers are able move up the career ladder through well-defined steps into increasingly skilled positions. For example, certified nursing assistants are able to become licensed practical nurses, who in turn, can become registered nurses, through continued education and training.

Recognizing that health care is a job-generating field, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded a \$5 million

grant to the Workforce Board to expand on this concept, making it possible for janitors, food handlers, and clerical staff at health care facilities to connect to a pathway that leads to higher demand and higher skills jobs. The grant is bringing together key players, including employers, education, and labor organizations, and investing them in the success of these workers.

This concept has the potential to grow well beyond health care. Indeed, by turning workplaces into learning laboratories and breaking the barriers to the classroom, we can make lifelong learning the backbone of our "new economy." As the distinction between classroom and workplace blurs, Washington workers will be able to move in and out of educational opportunities and up the career ladder throughout their working lives, creating opportunities below them as they go.

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