



SHOP TALK # 8: STILL MORE PROMISING PRACTICES

The South Central GREAT Center, ESC Region XX, Adult Education and Literacy Programs within the South Central region, Alamo WorkSource, and the City of San Antonio recently hosted their second annual Adult Education and Workforce Conference, with employer participation at an impressive all-time high.

Charting the Course Toward Success featured a panel of employers from the area. The two sessions gave participants the opportunity to hear directly from employers about the issues they face when hiring individuals for jobs, the major challenges they face when looking for qualified workers, and the employment requirements of the industry / businesses they represent. Representatives of Sino Swearingen Aircraft Corporation, DPT Laboratories (pharmaceutical), the city of Wharton, Family Dollar (sales and service), and York International (commercial air conditioning equipment) answered questions about hiring requirements and practices, academic and skill requirements, and training/education links to employment.

Employers voiced concerns about the shortage of individuals trained in the craft trades (welders, electricians, technicians, etc.) at a time when global competitiveness, cost effectiveness, and safety are critical. While education and training requirements range from minimal (less than a high school diploma) to postsecondary, a common concern is that potential employees possess the work readiness skills (attitude, aptitude, work ethic, motivation, an appreciation for the culture of the workplace, and stability to mention a few) needed not only to get a job but to survive and qualify for career advancement opportunities and employer-sponsored training opportunities.

In another session, Vulcan Materials (300 facilities in twenty-two states, with twenty plants in Texas) described its onsite ESL program from inception to the completion of its first round of classes. True to its mission statement, which articulates a commitment to safety and health as well as the development of company talent and individual advancement within the company, Vulcan identified the need for its employees to improve their English language skills in order to succeed on the job. The HR supervisor cited the need for employees to communicate accurately by radio, to follow safety codes when operating / shutting down machinery and equipment, and to understand the importance of appropriate use of safety attire.

Vulcan's ESL program was a year in the planning. Critical time was devoted to ensuring that both management and employees – including frontline supervisors and co-workers not participating in the ESL program – invested in the program. In addition, the company made a number of other contributions to ensure program success:

- ✓ Understanding the nature of language learning, management had to make a long term commitment to ESL instruction for its employees.
- ✓ Classes had to be offered onsite due to long work shifts and so that employees would not lose wages to attend.
- ✓ The company gave participants release time to clean up and prepare for classes.
- ✓ The company paid for and provided backpacks, instructional materials, instructor salaries, and facilities.
- ✓ Management paid regular visits to observe classes and reinforcement of instructional activities and applications.
- ✓ Vulcan provided work-related terminology, forms, safety materials, and environmental print.
- ✓ The company created a website for participants, publicity in the company newsletter and at safety meetings, and recognition of employees' success.

The bottom line: the return on the company's investment includes better educated employees able to participate in company meetings and other employer-sponsored training, the discovery of hidden assets among a group of employees, happier heads of household, immediate and long term payoffs (increased productivity, quality control). Most encouraging: Vulcan views its commitment not as a cost but as an investment.

Another unique session worth noting because it provided information new to many of the participants: Goodwill Industries' Director of Workforce provided an overview of Goodwill's *Learn While You Earn* model that prepares, places, and retains its clients while providing opportunities for advancement and building effective, long lasting communication collaborations. Goodwill's mission: to change lives through the power of work. Locally, Goodwill employs over one thousand employees. Ninety cents of every dollar goes into local workforce development. In addition, Goodwill handles approximately \$12 million in annual contracts (maintains all HVAC work at Fort Sam; processes records for Randolph Air Force Base, and maintains critical immigration data for Homeland Security). Goodwill provides Job Help Centers (similar to one stops) that are employment focused and designed to give clients the tools needed to stay on the job and advance to the second rung of the career ladder.

Keynote speakers included the HR manager of Logistics and Operations at Valero LLC and the chief financial officer of Hill Country Bakery. Both stressed the importance of reading, writing, communication, and math skills related to the workplace, basic computer skills, and safety awareness. For some jobs, hand-to-eye coordination, attention to detail, and physical fitness are essential job skills, as are an appreciation for production flow and quality control. Teamwork was cited as critical to almost every job described by employers. Other critical work readiness skills include: the ability to reason, problem solve, and communicate with both peers and supervisors; the ability to teach and lead others as well as learn from mentors; and the ability to give and follow oral and written direction.

Luncheon speaker Joanie Rethlake, Director of Texas LEARNS, provided an overview of adult education's response to Education Rider 82 and the development of curricular responses to industry-related needs. Her presentation was amplified in an afternoon session presented by Seguin ISD, an adult education provider engaged in the development of industry-related curricula for healthcare services and manufacturing. In this session, program staff shared with participants the discovery process involved in developing curricular modules and then piloting them in a "soft launch" process. Alan Miller, Executive Director of Alamo WorkSource, also speaking to participants over lunch, voiced concern over San Antonio's shrinking skilled labor force and the education and training needs of a large unskilled labor pool, noting that growth is outpacing the region's ability to provide skilled, employable workers.

Additional sessions addressed issues such as education and training programs offered in correctional facilities by Windham School District; Randolph-Brooks financial literacy program for adults developed in response to House Bill 900 and requiring local workforce development boards to provide financial literacy training; adult education assessment and performance measures; health literacy; and Project RIO transitional services provided by the Department of Criminal Justice to assist the reintegration of ex-offenders into their communities and the workforce. The Alamo Community College featured its Career and Technology Centers designed to provide links between communities and community college campuses. Alamo WorkSource provided a session featuring an online tour of web-based tools and resources partners can access to learn more about the region's evolving job market and connecting their customers to quality career opportunities.

Interested in learning about the process of planning such an event? Contact Olga Escamilla at ESC Region XX, olga.escamilla@esc20.net.