



IN DEPTH: EDUCATION & TRAINING

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Building Skills

Workplace training linked to area's economic growth

Alan Miller

The American workplace has changed significantly over the years, and continues to change at an accelerated rate. The nature of work itself has changed. Gone are the days when people spent their entire working lives working for the same company or doing the same job. Certain types of jobs are becoming obsolete and the skills required to perform others are constantly changing.

Most people in today's world of work will face multiple job and career changes over the span of their working lives. People are working beyond the traditional retirement age.

Today's workplace is constantly being reshaped by new technologies, improvements in productivity, shifting markets, and global competition. We're witnessing the "off-shoring" of jobs, increased reliance on contract work, and more and more people are working from alternative work environments -- such as from home.

Entering the workplace requires increasingly higher levels of education and skills. Experts estimate that over 80 percent of all new jobs being created will require some level of education and/or training beyond high school. A high school diploma used to be the benchmark for entering the workplace. Today it is a bare minimum.

Each day hundreds of jobs in the Alamo City area go unfilled because of a lack of technically qualified job applicants. This does not mean that everyone has to go to college and earn a degree. Quite the opposite. There are a great many good-paying job opportunities that are available for individuals with as little as one to two years of post-secondary education or training -- jobs such as auto technicians, aircraft maintenance technicians, electricians, medical assistants and more.

To remain competitive in the global economy, training, retraining and skill upgrading have become increasingly important to both business and workers. Life-long, continuous learning is a necessity.

Area economic development efforts are concentrating on building and growing industries such as aerospace/aviation, information technology, bio and life sciences, manufacturing technology, and communications -- all of which require higher levels of education and skills from job seekers.

Work force and economic development are so linked together that they are almost inseparable. You can't have one without the other. The economic growth and prosperity -- for businesses, residents and the entire community -- is dependent upon the quality of our work force.

Opportunities for the future location of companies, such as Toyota, or the expansion of existing businesses will increasingly rely on the availability of a skilled work force.

The development of a well-educated, highly skilled work force takes place at many different levels. The work force "system" encompasses pre-K programs preparing children to learn before they reach school, the K-12

system, our colleges and universities, technical schools, and community-based programs. It also includes training, both basic and technical, conducted by employers.

A number of employers in the Alamo City area provide training to their employees directly, or offer educational reimbursement programs. Many others need to do the same. Some businesses are afraid to invest in the training of their employees for fear that they will move on to other companies.

Some people will move on, but the failure to invest in continuous training may have a higher cost. Training can lead to more productive employees and improved morale. More importantly, it allows business and workers to remain competitive.

The Alamo City area is faced with many challenges and opportunities surrounding work force develop. Work force development is everyone's business and in everyone's best interests. It's a subject that we can't just talk about. It is one that requires action and the willingness to invest in resources -- financial and in human capital.

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