

Eileen Drake on work force training

Premium content from Portland Business Journal

Date: Friday, January 7, 2011



Eileen Drake

*As vice chair of the metals trade group Manufacturing 21 Coalition, **Eileen Drake** is the group's expert on work force training and development issues. She also has plenty of experience with work force issues in her job as vice president, administration and legal affairs at Portland's PCC Structurals Inc.*

The Business Journal asked Drake about Oregon's need for work force training programs and ways those needs can be met.

1. What is the unmet need for work force training in Oregon?

It is always a challenge to match up supply and demand in work force training — connecting job seekers with training options and available jobs in their communities.

Even in the best of times, there were continued obstacles to meeting those dual needs. We've seen shrinking and shifting funding priorities at both the state and federal levels.

The regionalized structure of our work force investment boards, community colleges and other training partners makes it difficult for individual businesses and industry groups to have one conversation around training needs.

At the same time, industry is similarly fragmented. So there are always multiple conversations and efforts underway. Having said that, there has in fact been increasing cooperation and collaboration among the work force development partners and industry in the past few years — with very good results in both bringing training grants into the state and better connecting training with jobs.

Another significant gap in Oregon is in youth opportunities for training and work experience. We are trying in the Portland area and in some other communities to increase summer work experience opportunities for youth.

On the whole, though, there is a huge disconnect between educating youth for future employment and actually training and connecting them to employment.

2. How did the recession affect the need for training?

The economic downturn has exacerbated the supply and demand imbalance. The number of job seekers greatly exceeds the available jobs. And there are many underemployed individuals and people who would like to make an upward career move but are unable to find openings.

However, some of our industries are starting to grow again and there are, and will continue to be, replacement jobs becoming available. It may seem counterintuitive, but it is a good time to include a strong on-the-job work force training focus for Oregon. Some of our employers continue to have to go out of state to find the people with the skills they need in higher-level positions. On-the-job training can help fill these gaps and give workers opportunities for higher-paying jobs.

3. Will the National Career Readiness Certificate be helpful in Oregon?

Yes. The certificate is awarded to those tested for measurable work force skills. The credential can be awarded at different levels, depending on one's test results. Different states take different approaches to the program.

Leading business groups endorse Oregon's version of the certificate — scheduled to be officially launched on Jan. 25 — as a valuable work force development tool and a growing number of employers are using it in conjunction with recruiting and hiring. Oregon's version works by providing objective certification of a person's foundational skills in math, reading and locating information. Employers use the certificate along with other factors to determine an applicant's fit for a job opening.

Because the certificate is coordinated through the Oregon Employment Department and work force training partners, candidates who do not perform well on the assessments can be referred for training. Employers interested in participating in the pilot projects can learn more at www.OregonNCRC.org.

4. How well have community colleges met training needs?

We've seen improvement in the past few years in two areas.

First, the community colleges are working better together to reduce overlaps and cover gaps in work force training. Second, the community colleges and businesses are having more effective communications about industry needs and training curriculum options.

We're also seeing more direct links between community college training and jobs through partnerships such as internship opportunities for students in specialized programs or customized supervisor training.

There is room to do more, of course, but the efforts over the past three to four years are encouraging.

5. How is the manufacturing industry working with four-year colleges and universities?

Manufacturing 21 Coalition, the metals manufacturing industry group, has worked with five Northwest universities (Portland State University, Oregon State University, University of Oregon, Oregon Institute of Technology and Washington State University, Vancouver) to understand how their faculty, laboratories and students can better serve the needs of the materials manufacturing and metals fabrication industry.

The result was creation of a virtual organization called the Northwest Collaboratory for Sustainable Manufacturing. The Collaboratory's purpose is to sustain and grow institutional capabilities to support the productivity, competitiveness and sustainability of this manufacturing cluster.

The Collaboratory is not a single institution, but will operate as a networked program across participating campuses supporting applied research and talent recruiting needs of industry.