

JOB-SEEKER

Meeting employer needs: closing the soft-skills gap

BY ADMIN

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Consider these findings from the *Closing the Gap: 2012 Skills Survey of North Carolina Employers*, conducted by the N.C. Association of Workforce Development Boards:

- >> "Communication and Interpersonal Skills represents a primary gap in workplace soft skills. Critical and Analytical Thinking and Problem Solving were also frequently indicated.
- >> "Businesses indicated that improved Soft Skills/Personal Effectiveness training would be of most value in the future followed closely by Occupational Skills training.
- >> "Employers say there is a strong need for standardized work readiness skills training and certification."

In response to this and other studies that pointed to the same conclusions, multiple local organizations, including Charlotte Works, realized that they needed not only to address these employer concerns, but to do so in a coordinated manner.

So they formed the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Partners to "raise the bar to connect people with barriers to employment to jobs and careers." Chaired by **Michael Elder**, president and CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont and Charlotte Works board member, this group (see a complete membership list below) has been working for more than two years to remove the silos within the local workforce sector, agree on shared goals and best practices to be used by all Partners, reduce barriers to employment and build employers' confidence in the Partners' ability to provide them with well-matched job candidates, among other goals.

While the group is focusing on developing shared business development/employer outreach practices, creating a standardized intake/data collection process and determining common metrics, it recently rolled out its first significant contribution to bridging the skills gap: a soft-skills curriculum that certifies students as having obtained those non-technical skills necessary to succeed in the workplace.

Piloted by five Partner organizations in March (Center for Community Transitions/Urban League of Central Carolinas, Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC), Charlotte Works, Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont and the local office of the N.C. Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services), the soft-skills curriculum offered students between 15 and 30 hours of instruction in employer work ethics and organizational, communications and problem-solving skills (depending on the pilot site).

Here at Charlotte Works, Career Coach **Anastasia Knight** and Volunteer Manager **Julie Paul** taught the course to six participants in the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration's Title V SCSEP (Senior Community Service Employment Program).

Knight sees a definite value in the course for all job-seekers. "The curriculum is very

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clear and concise, and the hands-on and situational-based activities exposed our participants to behavioral-style interviews, communications skills and personal-branding skills," she says. "The combination of all the modules will help you, step by step, get prepared for the job search and show you how to do your job in a way to be promoted."

Sheena Ashley, program coordinator, college and career readiness department, piloted the soft-skills curriculum to a group of students in CPCC's Way to Work program that provides students with basic reading and math instruction, training in technology or soft skills and an internship. She's been part of the Partners' soft-skills sub-committee, chaired by **Kathi Polis McLendon**, dean, college and career readiness at CPCC, since its inception and helped develop the curriculum.

"This was a labor of love. It was rewarding to see the things we developed go over so well in the classroom and see the students learn about themselves and how to be successful in the future," says Ashley. "The way the curriculum is taught, with its level of depth, really does teach the critical interpersonal skills needed to advance in the workplace."

Brenda Jefferson is a Charlotte Works volunteer who participated in the pilot class at the Employer Engagement Center. She particularly enjoyed the interactive nature of the curriculum, which includes discussion and role-playing. Most helpful, though, was the insight it offered into the mind of an employer.

"The most valuable thing it gave me was the opportunity to see myself through the eyes of an employer, and that I have to sharpen my skills to be valuable to that employer," she says. "We, as people who are looking for jobs, forget that we have to polish ourselves – say, 'What is it about me that is not marketable at this time?' The class was a reminder for me to polish my skills and make another investment in my career."

The soft-skills sub-committee is working now to tweak the curriculum based on feedback from both participants and instructors in the pilot. When it's ready to launch in June, the soft-skills certification will encompass five modules of 16 to 20 lessons delivered over at least 24 hours. The course will be offered by multiple organizations.

Charlotte Works has been designated as the certifying agency for the soft-skills program. Participants will receive actual certificates based on the number of modules they complete from the organization through which they are trained; they'll be awarded a master certificate upon completion of the entire program from Charlotte Works. The Partners' goal is for this soft-skills certification to be recognized by all local employers as a credential signifying employability.

If you're a job-seeker interested in earning the new soft-skills certification, watch the Charlotte Works event calendar on NCWorks Online to register when the course is opened to the public in June.

*If you're an employer interested in offering the certification to your employees and/or candidates, contact **Jim Korth**, On-The-Job Training specialist at Charlotte Works, at 704.390.7093, for information.*

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Workforce Development Partners

- >> Center for Community Transitions
- >> Charlotte Area Fund
- >> Charlotte Works
- >> Central Piedmont Community College, Division of College and Career Readiness
- >> Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Career and Technical Education Program
- >> Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont
- >> Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, Economic Services Division
- >> North Carolina Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- >> Urban League of the Southern Piedmont

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