

TIES 2 Work: Employer-Specific Training in New Brunswick

Challenge

Residents of Saint John, New Brunswick are weathering the recent economic downturn quite well, due largely to energy mega-projects already in development. Local employers had estimated they would need to hire 8,000 new workers in the next few years and were prepared to advertise within and outside Saint John to fill these positions.

The low income rate for Saint John stands at 20.8 percent, four percentage points higher than the average for Canadian cities [Statistics Canada 2006]. Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) has worked with leaders from many sectors of the community to identify the traps that keep people living in poverty. VCSJ has collectively built public understanding of the issues and worked together on solutions. Its efforts to better support adults with low levels of education have helped many individuals.

Thanks to VCSJ's community- and relationship-building work, employers were open to the idea of trying out a new training-to-employment project that would secure them job-ready entry level employees – found right in their own backyard.

Strategy

Vibrant Communities Saint John – in partnership with employers, community agencies, government and educational institutions – is now pilot testing a new employer-specific training approach called “TIES 2 Work.” The goal is to create a match between employers and potential employees by providing essential skills training specifically tailored to employer requirements. Job candidates are pre-screened and selected by employers before they begin 12 weeks of classroom and on-site training and, in return, are promised a full-time job. Organizers hope to involve 24

unemployed adults in the project annually. The program name was coined by the first group of participants to reflect the essential ties that exist between essential skills and training, and the fact that community partners are ‘tied’ – or linked together – by the initiative.

TIES 2 Work is based on successful programs in Canada and the United States. A Leadership Team – chaired by Regena Farnsworth from the University of New Brunswick Saint John – with 15 representatives from business, provincial government departments, educational institutions and community agencies was formed to guide and champion the approach. Funds from the New Brunswick Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour will pay for a three-year pilot testing of the approach. TIES 2 Work will be delivered by the Saint John Learning Exchange, a VCSJ partner with 25 years of experience in adult training.

Says Learning Exchange Executive Director Christina Fowler: “This project is exciting for a number of reasons. Traditionally, we have helped people get the training they need to be job ready, but were uncertain whether they would ultimately secure employment. Though we now must work with the two sides of the employment relationship and recruit both learners and employers, the end result of TIES 2 Work is a guaranteed job.”

Christina and her co-workers appreciate the fact that partnerships bring new elements to the education-to-employment work carried out by small nonprofit organizations like the Learning Exchange. She continues: “We are thrilled to work on this project with a team of people whose expertise in the areas of education and evaluation extends and enriches our training capabilities. In particular, the evaluation team – which includes representatives from government and postsecondary institutions – is embedded in the work from beginning to end. This allows us to make continual adjustments and improvements and lends an outside perspective that is both helpful and invigorating.”

The project initiative is also a component to the Workforce Action Steering Committee of Enterprise Saint John, the Greater Saint John economic development agency. Its mandate and core services include developing and implementing economic development strategies and encouraging workforce expansion.

The funding partnership with New Brunswick Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour has also resulted in the participation of a regional director and two departmental employees in TIES 2 Work. Members of the project leadership team (VCSJ, Enterprise Saint John and the provincial government department in particular) work with the Learning Exchange on the recruitment of employers. After the initial employer screening, an employment coordinator with the provincial government department and staff from the Learning Exchange meet with the employer again, assess the materials for the skills curriculum and help coordinate the best candidate-employer match. The employment coordinator follows up with the employer to finalize the placement and to ensure that everything is in place. Another provincial employee performs a prior learning assessment on the candidate prior to selection into the program. Follow-up interviews with employees will take place at three- and 12-month intervals.

Employers are integral to the success of this initiative. Their participation involves:

- identifying the workplace essential skills they require
- assisting in selecting candidates for the training
- providing work placements that support employers' needs
- hiring the successful participants at a starting wage of at least \$10/hour.

Employers benefit from reductions in the cost and risk of bringing on new employees and increased productivity as a result of gaining access to trained, pre-screened employees. Employee participants will have the chance to learn employment skills and strengthen their contacts and connections in the labour force.

Shirley Mitchell is Human Resources Manager of Coast Tire and Auto Service, a tire and automotive business with 26 locations across the Maritimes. As an employer representative to the TIES 2 Work Leadership Team, Shirley has helped arrange a placement at Coast Tire's largest Saint John location. Says Shirley: "Much of the economy depends on our ability to safely move products by truck, and our industry has become more regulated and complicated. New workers now require training and certification which they may not have anticipated, so getting and keeping good people has become more difficult. TIES 2 Work gives potential employees a clearer understanding of our requirements; they learn about our terminology and standards, and they get three weeks of work on the shop floor. All of that will result in workers who are better prepared and more likely to fit well into the job and our organization."

One of the biggest barriers to employment identified by VCSJ is the issue of whether a person has completed high school. Having a General Education Development (GED) certificate is no guarantee that holders will be capable of performing the essential job skills required, however, or that they are able to demonstrate the soft skills such as teamwork, responsibility and judgment that most employers desire.

Through extensive research, the federal government and other national and international agencies have identified nine essential skills that are used in nearly every occupation and in daily life. Though application and complexity levels may vary, these skills help form a basis upon which job readiness and performance can be measured. They are: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, thinking skills, teamwork, continuous learning, oral communication and computer use. These workplace essential skills are the skills that apply to all occupations and enable people to carry out a wide variety of everyday life and work tasks. The focus on essential skills represents a new direction for New Brunswick in assisting adults with low levels of education. (For more information, visit: http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/understanding_es.shtml)

Outcomes

To date, three employers – Coast Tire and Auto Service, the City of Saint John and Fortis Properties – with a total of six positions are embarking on TIES 2 Work. Six participants who were screened for their literacy levels, prior learning and desire and readiness for work began training in early April.

The program offers a solution to the difficulties associated with finding the right people for particular jobs, and it provides the break that would-be employees need to make a fresh start. As Coast Tire Manager Chris Veinot says: “People are like diamonds in the rough – given the right opportunity, they will discover their capacity to learn and make a positive contribution.”

Cathy Wright and Anne Makhoul

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Reference

Statistics Canada. (2006). *Census*.

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