

Chamber, MnSCU partner in closing workforce skills gaps

By David C. Olson

Minnesota's economy continues to make gains as the state's May unemployment rate was the lowest in almost seven years. But one theme remains constant: Employers, whether enjoying good times or bad times, are challenged to find skilled workers.

The good news is that we have a strong ally in addressing the workforce shortage. Building a quality workforce is essential to a vibrant economy, and our state's colleges and universities play a vital role in that effort. The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and our local chambers are committed to strengthening that partnership as we all work together to create and keep jobs in Minnesota.

Key statistics underscore the disturbing trends:

- By 2020, 74 percent of Minnesota's jobs will require postsecondary education. Approximately 150,000 additional workers will need to complete postsecondary training to fill that need.
- The state's graying population translates into a smaller pool of workers.
- Demand for middle-skill jobs is increasing. From 2010-2020, there will be a 12-percent uptick in jobs that require two-year degrees, but only a 4-5-percent increase in jobs that require four-year degrees.

The drumbeat for more skilled workers was sounded once again during the Minnesota Chamber's Statewide Policy Tour last month. Employers throughout Minnesota reported that many high-paying technical jobs are hard to fill due to a lack of qualified applicants.

The comments come on the heels of "The State of Manufacturing" report released by Enterprise Minnesota. Manufacturers are more confident in their future than at any point since 2009, the survey noted. But their ability to attract and retain qualified workers continues to be a growing issue; 34 percent of respondents listed it as a key concern, up 20 points since 2011.

In 2012, the Minnesota Chamber launched an initiative with the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system to address workforce needs. The first step was to identify employer needs across the spectrum of the workforce. The second step is to ensure that postsecondary institutions listen and respond to employer feedback by examining curriculum and course offerings – from certificate and degree programs to worker retraining to custom training. We're making progress, and there's more work to do.

Our efforts to make students more marketable for today's jobs are not welcomed by all. Chancellor Steven Rosenstone has been criticized for listening too much to the needs of employers and not enough to the wishes of students and their parents. Such comments appear misguided. The interests of both students and employers are at the foundation of our work with MnSCU's blueprint for systemwide change. A better aligned curriculum means a stronger state economy and more jobs for all our postsecondary graduates.

David Olson is president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. For more information, visit the Web at www.mnchamber.com.