

Local chambers drive workforce solutions

By Doug Loon

As the Minnesota Chamber's new president, I have been touring the state to learn firsthand the challenges facing employers. A common theme has emerged: Minnesota has reached the perfect storm in finding qualified workers.

Worker demand is growing due to our stronger economy, and fewer people are entering the workforce in an aging population. Minnesota continues to be dogged by one of the widest achievement gaps in the nation that persists among racial groups and across socioeconomic classes. The problem often is aggravated by a lack of affordable housing and/or transportation options.

There is no silver bullet in filling job vacancies, and we'll make little headway unless we are sharing relevant data on a timely basis with all the stakeholders – students, education institutions and workforce training centers. On that note, we're excited to launch Business Education Networks, a proactive approach with our chamber partners to better synchronize workforce skills with the needs of the changing economy. This private-sector initiative is based on the premise that solving our state's workforce problems is more about communications and persistence than new legislation.

Minnesota's local chambers of commerce already are doing great things. In Grand Rapids, TeenWorks is a two-week summer program that gives youths a leg up by providing them with a five-year plan for careers and education, increased self-confidence and preparation to get a job now and in the future. In Bemidji, the InternBemidji website is a cooperative project with local colleges and business leaders to help employers find talent for short-term projects and to help students start a career. In Eden Prairie, the High School Career Fair allows dozens of career professionals to share their expertise and career path with thousands of students. In Brainerd, the Bridges Career Academies & Workplace Connection, in collaboration with others, helps high school students understand local career opportunities.

Despite these best efforts, workforce shortages continue. Winona is a great example of a community that has excelled in strengthening connections among business, education and community leaders to build the workforce. Home to 100-plus manufacturers, it still struggles to find qualified applicants for a variety of high-demand manufacturing jobs. We chose Winona to launch Business Education Networks because of these existing partnerships. Its most recent project is "Hot Jobs, Cool Companies," a manufacturing and jobs outlook directory that lists opportunities and required skills. The directory will be used by the Winona State University School of Business, Minnesota State College – Southeast Technical and area high schools.

Funded by grants from the Carlson Family Foundation and Bush Foundation, Business Education Networks aims to ensure educators are in sync with economic change. The job skills required to propel today's economy change almost as regularly as do our seasons. Employers don't have the time or luxury to wait for a new curriculum to be developed and then to produce graduates two or even four years later.

Our goal is to expand the effort in Winona to other local communities which have their own distinct workforce needs. Working with local chambers of commerce, we'll assess worker supply and demand, and then develop approaches tailored to meet those challenges. We'll succeed only if we are sharing relevant data on a timely basis with all the stakeholders – students, education institutions and workforce training centers. Our strategy behind Business Education Networks mobilizes our state's employers – the players with the most at stake in ensuring Minnesota's workforce is well prepared.

Minnesota businesses have collectively distinguished themselves with their ability to compete in the global marketplace in large part due to a highly trained workforce. Strengthening local chamber initiatives and building Business Education Networks will ensure continued success.

Doug Loon is president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce – www.mnchamber.com.