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Common Employability Skills Case Studies

CEWD received a National Network of Business Industry Associations (NNBIA) Capacity-Building Grant to determine how educators are preparing the future workforce on employability skills and how member employers assess for and use these types of skills in their hiring processes. This work is based on NNBIA's Common Employability Skills (CES) Framework, which establishes a vivid, unifying description of the requisite Applied Knowledge along with the Personal, People, and Workplace Skills needed to gain employment. CEWD has developed an energy industry version of the CES where there are skill "add-ons," such as engineering and a greater focus on decision making, as well as other areas that are especially important in energy industry careers. A summary of these skills are available at: <http://www.cewd.org/common-employability-skills/>.

One outcome of this grant is a set of case studies for how educational institutions are preparing the future workforce, ensuring that graduates come to employers with a solid foundation of employability skills. This month's newsletter includes case study write-ups for three different approaches, one for high school students and the other two for community college students.

TCI Solutions' Legacy I³ Model

Introduction

TCI Solutions, LLC, is a certified minority- and veteran-owned business committed to providing the highest quality of consultation in the following areas:

For Corporations:

1. Workforce Talent Pipeline Development
2. Corporate Diversity & Inclusion Training and Strategies
3. Corporate Citizenship, Community Outreach, and Engagement Strategies

For Educators:

1. Student Development Services
2. Teacher and Staff Professional Development Services
3. Parental Development and Engagement Services

TCI Solutions has provided quality consultation and service to more than 40 organizations and educational facilities throughout Illinois, Minnesota, Colorado, Georgia, District of Columbia, Virginia, California, Pennsylvania, and Arizona.

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Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD)©

TCI Solutions developed the Legacy I³ Model in 2012 to identify and effectively address the root causes of the persistent challenge that industry faces with attracting, developing, and retaining qualified, local, and diverse talent. The Legacy I³ Model is based on a collaborative approach that synchronizes and leverages the existing resources from five key sectors:

1. The relevant industry/company
2. Local secondary educational institutes
3. Local postsecondary educational institutes
4. Local/National community-based organizations
5. Federal, State, and Local government agencies

TCI Solutions helps companies to understand and establish the business case for short-term and long-term talent pipeline development, and ensure that the shared responsibilities of industry, education, and support organizations are understood and reinforced.

Summary of Approach(es)

Legacy begins its work with students by providing the foundational training to address needed life skills, such as emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and character development. Legacy believes employability skills cannot be properly addressed until these life skills are first introduced, since they are critical to helping a young person overcome the hurdles and realities of living in poverty and develop the mindset and context for moving forward into job readiness.

Common employability skills are then taught within the context of what they mean in a student's personal, school, and work environment. For example, how does punctuality tie into the student's personal and school life, and why is it important at the workplace?

"We take multiple skills and weave them into the curriculum so that students don't get it just from the workplace standpoint," said Deon Clark, CEO, TCI Solutions. "Many of them haven't held a job yet; they have not been there, so they have no context for this. Therefore, we take that skill and put it into the context of things that they can relate to, to help them visualize how they can use this skill in the workplace."

Legacy also brings industry partners into the classroom to assist with teaching employability skills. "We select employers who have employees available for classroom visits," said Clark, "and they give the students their perspective on what these skills mean, how they can enhance their chances of being hired and moving upward within the company."

Benefits, Results & Outcomes

Legacy measures success by how well-prepared students are, so that when they have the opportunity to present themselves to employers, they are confident in their qualifications and able to put their best foot forward. "We recognize that it's the employers who decide who gets hired and that there are many factors involved, so we don't measure success based solely on whether the students get jobs," said Clark. "We look at how well they have integrated the skills we have taught them. We do mock interviews. The people who do the hiring come in and practice doing interviews with our students."

"We have been told consistently that our students give some of the best interviews these employers have ever conducted. They are impressed at how well they present themselves. And they are able to provide very useful feedback to our students, letting them know what employers are looking for in an interview. Our students are then able to articulate what they know about the company and what they have to offer."

Legacy also gets feedback on its students through the internships they hold with industry partners. "They are impressed with our students," said Clark, "because they're punctual, they're confident, their work ethic is strong, and they ask a lot of questions."

There are four areas Legacy looks at to gauge how well students will perform when they leave high school: the ability to show up at school consistently; the ability to show up on time; the ability to focus on their schoolwork and not disrupt the class; and the ability to improve their grades. "Data from our most recent cohort shows all four of these measures going in the direction we want," said Clark.

Specifically, students in the program saw a reduction in absences of 34 percent; a reduction in tardiness of 45 percent; disciplinary action down 50 percent; and an average increase of .07 percent in GPA across all 107 students currently in the program.

Those measures, said Clark, can be directly correlated to the employability skills of punctuality, accountability, and being responsible.

“We can see they are using those principles while still in high school and having success with this,” he said.

Of the 124 students who have graduated from the Legacy program to date, Clark added, all are either currently working in their field or still in postsecondary programs pursuing degrees.

“Xcel Energy is proud and excited to be a key partner in the kick-off of the Legacy program in the Twin Cities,” said MJ Horner, Sr. Director, Talent Strategy and Transformation, Xcel Energy. “Legacy gives us exposure to a new generation of workers who may not be familiar with the types of careers and opportunities that the utility industry has to offer. The structure of the program not only gives students exposure to our industry, but it also allows hiring managers and recruiters the opportunity to get to know students personally and gives students the opportunity to get to know them, which helps to create a pipeline of a new generation of workers that have interest in our industry,” Horner continued. “I believe that the Legacy program provides the skills, knowledge, career and education guidance, and employment preparation that make the students a ‘right fit’ for Xcel Energy. I have personally observed the program in Arizona and have had personal interactions with the students in the Twin Cities summer pilot program. I was incredibly impressed with the discipline, drive, engagement, and intelligence of the students in the program. We are looking forward to a long and rewarding relationship with Legacy.”

Sustainability & Overcoming Implementation Challenges

Doing workforce development with young people, many of whom are living in poverty, has unique challenges. Among them is ensuring that when we present them to employers, we do not put any labels on them, said Clark. Often, companies feel like they are being told that they need to “do the right thing” and just give the young people a chance. That’s not really attractive to employers, because companies are looking for the best candidates, not candidates who simply need a chance. “So we remove the label from the candidates. Our model needs to be strong enough to show them this is not a charitable thing; you are getting from us a high-quality candidate. We are not developing kids with issues; we are developing young people who live in your service area. They are local, diverse, and aspire to work for the company that’s based in their own community. These are the candidates we are preparing—nothing more, nothing less.”

The second biggest challenge Legacy faces is getting all relevant stakeholders at the table and getting everyone to understand the roles they can play, Clark said. “In order for this model to work, we first have to get buy-in from employers. Once they see that they are getting high-quality candidates, we help them understand the role they can play developing those candidates. Our model is built upon collaboration from many stakeholders: industry, educators, students, families, and community organizations that provide the students with the support they need to be available to learn. Our job is bringing all of these pieces together. In most cases, the pieces are already out there and we’re simply getting them aligned so they can all work in concert and then filling in the gaps where they might exist.”

Finally, to make a model sustainable, it must be adaptable to more than one industry, said Clark. “The process to develop the students remains the same, it’s just a matter of working with different employers,” he said. “We had to articulate how our model could be adapted. We started with energy but quickly adapted the model to apply to construction, manufacturing, and healthcare.”

Words of Wisdom

“For employers who need these young people to be successful candidates, I would say that they need to be deeply engaged in the process,” concluded Clark. “Only people who are inside the industry can really understand the benefits of working there, so the employer needs to communicate directly and passionately with students about what it is they need to be successful, what they need to know and to do to get into their industry, and why it’s a great place to be. Industry partners also need to help teachers understand the relevancy of what they are teaching so that they can impart that knowledge to their students. Show them why they are learning what they’re learning. To do that, employers really must be engaged at a much deeper level.”

Flint Hills Technical College

Introduction

Flint Hills Technical College (FHTC) is a two-year public institution of higher education located in east central Kansas, offering 15 programs of study, including Power Plant Technology. Students can earn a Certificate or an Associate of Applied Sciences in this program, which was launched in 2000 with the assistance of the Wolf Creek Nuclear Operating Corporation. Created to train workers for this nearby nuclear facility, the program now prepares future power plant operators and mechanics to serve at fossil- and nuclear-powered facilities. Graduates also pursue career opportunities with municipal power plants, outage providers, ethanol plants, and other energy-related industries. With advisory board members from Kansas City Power & Light, Wolf Creek, Westar Energy, Sunflower Electric Power Corp., Kan-Seal (an outage contractor), and Kansas Municipal Utilities, the program is designed to respond to the needs of industry so that together they can develop the successful worker of tomorrow.

Summary of Approach(es)

Teamwork, problem solving, integrity, and work ethic are skills that are highly regarded and sought by today’s employers. Known collectively as Common Employability Skills, they are often noted as lacking in today’s job applicants. The topic has now found its way into the educational world, where postsecondary institutions increasingly recognize that factual knowledge alone is not sufficient for developing a good potential employee. FHTC and its advisory board members realized that an emphasis on these employability skills had to be integrated into the Power Plant Technology field of study. As a result, a list of program expectations that includes these skills, as well as a method to give students feedback on their progress achieving them, was developed and folded into the program.

Westar Energy provided FHTC with an evaluative sheet it had been using for new hires that was then modified for use in the classroom. Twice a year, students are asked to evaluate themselves on these employability skill sets. Instructors also evaluate their progress and then discuss the findings with students. If needed, concerns are addressed with appropriate plans of action. Continual lack of progress is cause for termination from the program.

Benefits, Results & Outcomes

Industry partners visit the classroom and reinforce with students how important it is to employers that they possess these skills, as well as a sense of professionalism. They convey to students that what they are looking for is a basic, foundational knowledge and possession of these skills and traits; they can provide additional training, as needed, after an employee is hired. “What they desire coming in is that *teachable* attitude which has its basis in employability skills obtained prior to taking this position,” said Jeff Devilbiss, Power Plant Technology Instructor, FHTC.

“It is amazing how many individuals, especially those about to enter the job market, have never had a heart-to-heart conversation with anyone covering their strengths and weaknesses in these critical skills,” he said. “Forcing this issue has resulted in some honest self-assessments for students, and made the instructors’ jobs a bit easier in broaching these topics.”

It’s also making a difference with FHTC’s industry partners.

“As a result of incorporating several levels of employability criteria, we are receiving word back from our energy industry partners that not only are our graduates technically prepared, they are exhibiting increasing proficiency in employability skills, which had been lacking in previous years,” he said.

Sustainability & Overcoming Implementation Challenges

At FHTC, the Power Plant Technology program was one of several programs to implement a more rigorous integration of employability skills. Several factors have come together so that now, the entire institution has implemented a means to dialogue with students on such assessments. The college calendar includes one “assessment” day each semester devoted to fostering that dialogue, which will better prepare the future graduate to be the best candidate for employment or promotion.

In the Power Plant Technology program, graduates are asked to bring a hard copy of the assessment to interviews to show potential employers how they were evaluated as students. One challenge is that many companies do not allow supplemental items to be included in a job interview package. Another is that employability traits are difficult to evaluate and discuss with online students. Instructor/student interaction is vastly different in that arena.

Another implementation challenge is that of time. In the technical college world, many programs of study are governed by outside certification agencies and a requisite number of hours must be devoted to prescriptive subject matter. Incorporating additional time to enhance employability skills may be met with opposition. To overcome that obstacle, FHTC made contractual modifications that clarified for all parties the investment that management/administration was willing to make in order to see this come to fruition.

Words of Wisdom

“The technical college world gets this,” said Devilbiss. “Technical colleges are in a position to more rapidly respond to the needs of industry than are the four-year institutions. They realize that they only have a limited time with students, that their students are intently seeking training so as to improve their employability, and their background is industry-focused. When students get feedback and when they self-evaluate, they are both challenged and receive affirmation that they can set goals and pursue them. When industry validates the need for these employability skills during classroom visitation, career fairs, video presentations, and other means, it only enhances the overall outcome of our program.”

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College



Introduction

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) is a nationally ranked, two-year public college at which students prepare for high-tech careers. Energy programs at NWTC include solar energy technology, renewable energy, energy management technology, nuclear technology, utilities engineering technology, electrical power distribution, gas utility construction and service, energy management, and wind energy technology.

All NWTC students are provided with resources needed for success. As a result, 93 percent of grads have careers within six months of graduation; 80 percent of those grads are employed in their career fields. Hundreds more grads continue their education through NWTC’s transfer agreements with nearly 40 other colleges/universities.

Summary of Approach(es)

In conjunction with local employers, who serve on all of their advisory committees, NWTC developed a document outlining the most important common employability skills needed to make job applicants successful. The college incorporated those skills into curricula for all of its degree and diploma programs. The list includes personal accountability, critical and creative thinking, effective problem solving, effective communication, working cooperatively and professionally, demonstrating community and global accountability, and valuing individual differences and abilities.

The college doesn't just teach these employability skills; it also asks instructors to assess how well students are learning them. For example, in the school's Gas Utility program, students are expected to work in teams throughout the year in an outdoor lab, where they may be asked to locate a gas leak, dig up a line, or even lay pipe. They are each given different roles on the team and rotate those roles throughout the year. Not only does the instructor evaluate them on their performance in these roles, the students are asked to evaluate each other. Did they communicate with each other effectively? Show up on time? Perform their responsibilities? Contribute to the team's success?

Instructors are also asked to provide documentation as to how they are assessing these skills, so employers have some way of gauging whether applicants have mastered them. "If we can validate this through some type of assessment, the student has something they can take to an employer," said Dr. Amy Kox, Associate Dean, Energy & Agriculture, Trades & Engineering Technology, NWTC.



The list of employability skills, tailored to each industry, was initially developed through employer focus groups, Kox said. To keep the skills list current, the college works continuously with employers on program advisory committees to update the skill set as needed. Sometimes, changes are made based on the current population of students. For example, she said, when layoffs occurred several years ago, the college enrolled a large number of older students who already had workplace experience and didn't need as much instruction in this area.

Now, the state's unemployment rate is much lower and instructors are working with younger students who don't have much work experience and do need a lot of instruction in these areas. "We modify what we teach based on the people in front of us, as well as by what industry says it needs," she said.

Benefits, Results & Outcomes

"The benefit of teaching, modeling, and assessing employability skills is that graduates are much more prepared to work in the utility workforce," said Kox. "Utility and energy companies have told us how important it is for new employees to be able to communicate effectively, work in a team, and think critically. By practicing these skills during program classes and labs, students are able to build those skills."

Employers are happy with the results, said Kox.

"We have feedback from employers regarding our graduates and their ability to demonstrate those skills in the job," she said. "Employers come looking for our graduates from across the country."

"Through our collaborative partnership with NWTC, we are confident that the college takes into account our observations and feedback on their students' employability skills and adapts their curriculum to address our needs," said Jennifer Emmons, Manager of Talent Acquisition, Alliant Energy. "Employability skills that are appropriate for our industry are as critical as technical skills, and NWTC gets that."

Sustainability & Overcoming Implementation Challenges

To overcome the challenge of developing an appropriate means of assessing mastery of these skills, the college provided professional development sessions for faculty and staff. Instructors were taught techniques for assessing employability skills by other instructors who had experience with these types of assessments. Our utility program instructors are particularly strong in this area and provided insight into using project-based learning to assess employability skills.

Words of Wisdom

"Buy-in from instructors is key," said Kox. "Find an advocate in the training/teaching area, and utilize their experience to entice others to participate," she advised. "Providing good examples of how employability skills can be worked into classrooms helps instructors see how they can be applicable to every class. Make sure students know what you are doing. They should know that you are assessing their employability skills, and utilize the learning environment to provide a safe place for students to practice."

Upcoming

Careers in Energy Week 2016

October 17-21

Various Locations

State Energy Workforce Consortia National Forum

November 2

Arlington, VA

CEWD Annual Summit

November 2-4

Arlington, VA

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