

Workforce Basic Skills Improvement

Kentucky Enjoys Success; Indiana Needs to Follow

By Rebecca Patrick

The numbers are staggering. A million employed Hoosiers – one out of every three workers – lack the basic skills to complete the jobs in today's knowledge-based economy. What's more, only 20% of those in need recognize there's any problem. This dilemma is not unique to Indiana; most states have faced or will face similar situations due to evolving 21st century workplace demands. Neighboring Kentucky is a prime example.

The 1997 Kentucky Adult Literacy Survey found that 40% of the state's 2.4 million working-age adults were functioning at the two lowest literacy levels. In 2000, only 5% of those nearly one million Kentuckians were participating in adult education programs. (A person testing at these lower literacy levels likely cannot properly read a bus schedule or a flow chart).

Kentucky began tackling its problem head on five years ago, and in that time, has made significant strides. The number of employees participating in Kentucky's workforce adult education programs has increased from 8,000 people in 2000 to more than 51,000 employees in 2004. How did Kentucky make such a positive leap?

Getting started

"Quite simply, we knew that we had to respond to the growing need and demand in the workforce and, in particular, for short-term training for incumbent and potential employees," states Cheryl King, Ph.D., vice president of Kentucky Adult Education.

The Adult Education Reform Act of 2000, creating a partnership between Kentucky Adult Education and the Council on Postsecondary Education, helped put the state on the right path. Among the reform's highlights: cash bonuses to programs reaching enrollment and performance goals; family literacy programs in every county; online adult education instruction; tuition discounts and employer tax credits; training for teachers; and funding for a statewide publicity campaign.

"We also held two workforce summits with representation from business and industry that focused on internal and external strategies, as well as the desired training packages," King describes.

A crucial early step was to conduct a thorough survey of the business community to see what employers were looking for and how to make the existing services more effective. The recurrent theme: a one-stop shop for workforce training.

"Employers are busy and don't have the time to talk to a variety of people to get something accomplished," King says. "They wanted the ability to access a variety of training processes through one source, with much less involvement and lead time necessary at their end.

"In the past, employers had found government unresponsive to their needs. They were looking for us to present various solutions to their workforce needs in a flexible, timely and concise way," she notes.

Today, the terms "workplace literacy" or "basic skills" extend beyond reading, writing and mathematics. They include computer proficiency, communications skills, problem-solving abilities, the capacity to work effectively in teams, and the willingness to accept change and embrace personal improvement to meet evolving demands. Consequently, any one-stop program must truly serve a wide variety of needs.

Comprehensive offerings

Kentucky Adult Education listened and responded accordingly, creating a process that fits the bill. The program accommodates basic to technical skills in one package – all with improved coordination.



There are no quick solutions to workforce literacy challenges, says Kentucky's Cheryl King.

From preparatory assistance for those wanting to earn their GED, enroll in English as a second language class or raise their general literacy levels to learning enhanced workplace skills (e.g. computer programs; problem solving, critical thinking, etc.), it's all easily accessible.

One example of Kentucky's innovative response is through its use of the "skillmobiles," King says. "These are state-of-the-art training centers with computer labs that go around from business to business. They provide access to technology and training no matter where citizens live or work."

Each skillmobile has a 10-station computer lab, wireless Internet service, online curriculum and library services, plus 24/7 technical support. "There's no question that on-site training is preferable; it makes things easier for the employer and employee," King offers. "So, we bring a mobile classroom to the work site."

As with any program of this scope, funding is vital.

A network of public agencies, called the Workforce Alliance, was established to fund workplace education initiatives. Alliance members include Kentucky Adult Education, the Cabinet for Workforce Development, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, the Cabinet for Economic Development and the Council on Postsecondary Education, which grants the adult education funding for Alliance projects.

In-pocket incentives also exist to further spur employer and employee participation. An employer who allows employees to prepare for a GED on the clock can receive a tax credit of up to \$1,250 per employee. Meanwhile, an employee obtaining a GED can earn a \$250 tuition discount per semester for up to four semesters at one of Kentucky's public colleges or universities.

Taking it to the public

With government buy-in, funding in place and a clear direction of what employers wanted, the final piece of the puzzle was an aggressive public service television and radio campaign (entitled *Go Higher*) targeted at both employees and employers.

The overall goal for the campaign was simple: to raise education levels in Kentucky. Among the specific goals: increases in the number of Kentuckians enrolling in adult education programs, earning a GED, enrolling in postsecondary education and using state workforce education programs. All were accomplished.

"The *Go Higher* campaign really got the word out and brought the message home. The idea behind the campaign was what education will do for your life; that's a continual reminder for people," King explains.

The program has achieved so much so quickly that it's presented an unexpected challenge, offers King. "We have a waiting list for 2005 funds ... and to think, three and a half years ago, we wondered if all the money would be utilized."

Employer approval

In 2004, some 900 employers tapped into Kentucky's funds for adult education.

Carhartt, Inc., a family-owned company that has been manufacturing outdoor clothing and accessories since 1889, is among those that have benefited.

"The primary program we used through Kentucky Adult Education was the mobile lab (skillmobile) that

Skills Needed to Get a Job

- Read a want ad and complete a written application
- Talk about skills, abilities, accomplishments, likes and dislikes
- Answer and ask questions

Skills Needed to Survive on a Job

- Follow oral and written directions, ask for clarification or reasoning, and make small talk
- Locate written information, facts or specifications
- Understand technical vocabulary and the enabling words attached to them; for example, "pour the pellets into the extruder"
- Understand and use charts, diagrams and illustrations

Skills Needed to Thrive on a Job

- Give as well as follow instructions
- Participate in group discussions
- Teach others
- Predict outcomes
- State a position
- Express an opinion
- Access and use information from diverse sources

Source: Center for Applied Linguistics



Kentucky takes workforce literacy efforts on the road to businesses throughout the state.



was made available to us and brought on site to offer some introductory computer skills,” states Eugene Summers, distributions operation manager for the Carhartt facility in Hanson, Kentucky. “We had between 40 and 50 employees that took advantage of that opportunity.”

Summers said it was time well spent by the employees.

“Quite a few of our positions require a base level of technical skills since, for the most part, our operations are integrated into a wireless network. As a result, each of our operators has to be somewhat familiar with the basics of wireless devices (e.g. scanners, etc.),” he states. “Participating in those particular courses – computer and some basic math – we feel helped them in understanding the operating procedures for their particular functions and job tasks.

The classes were strictly voluntary. “We did this in an effort to assist our associates from the standpoint of both work-related skills and, additionally, if they wanted to take advantage of some introductory courses that would allow them to pursue, from a standpoint of adult education, their own personal interests,” Summers describes.

“Some employees had expressed an interest in continuing adult education in general or working toward a GED. Having the mobile lab come to our location was a way we could assist our employees.”

Kentucky Adult Education also helps prospective employers and employees through the use of the Kentucky Employability Certificate (KEC), which validates the skill level of workers based on three WorkKeys (an assessment system created by ACT) areas: reading for information, applied math and locating information.

The KEC certifies applicants with documented skill proficiencies so that employers can hire with confidence.

Approximately 800 KECs were issued to adult education students in 2004.

Hoosier front

In Indiana, the preparedness of the state’s workforce is just beginning to make headlines.

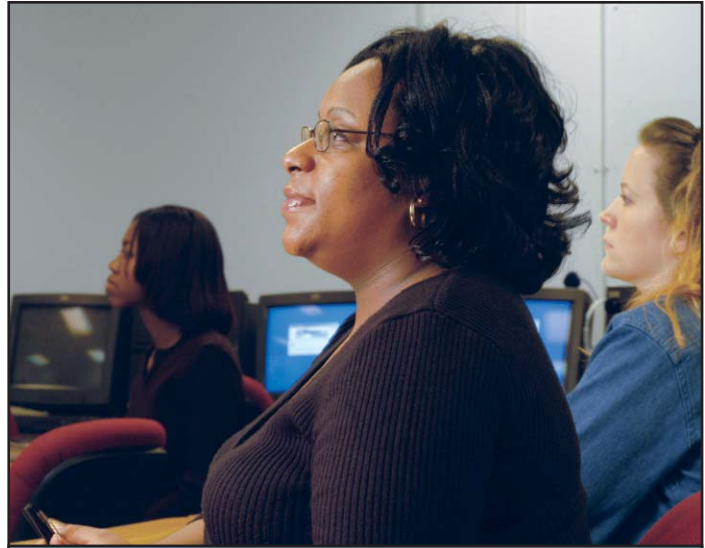
In mid-January, the Indiana Chamber released the study: *A Demand-Side Strategy to Meet Indiana’s Workforce Basic Skills Challenge*, which called for significant employer participation to right the ship – because many workers either do not realize their plight or elect not to seek the help they need.

This report was conducted by a national research firm under the guidance of the Chamber’s advisory committee comprised of public agencies and education, union and business groups.

Phase 2 of the Chamber’s literacy project calls for a statewide workforce summit, as well as pilot workplace programs and a full-time executive director to be hired to guide future efforts.

King, who participated in one of the Chamber’s workforce literacy forums last year, believes Indiana is building a foundation for its own successful program.

“From what I’ve seen, the commitment and support there, from a variety of sources, is exemplary, and along with the backing of key leaders, will ensure success of the program,” she says. “It just takes time.”



Literacy Levels

Persons at this level usually can:	Persons at this level usually cannot:	% of U.S. Adults*
1 Locate the expiration date on a driver’s license	Locate an intersection on a street map	20%
2 Determine the price difference between two tickets	Write a short letter explaining a billing error	27%
3 Use a bus schedule to get to a destination by a specific time	Explain the difference between two types of employee benefits	32%
4 Use information in a newspaper article to calculate money needed to raise a child	Determine the total cost of carpet to cover a room	18%
5 Use a table of information on oil exports to explain trends	(not applicable)	3%

*At 80% probability level

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 1993, 2001

The Chamber has had frequent communication about its study and the topic of workforce basic skills with the Daniels administration since the November 2 election and expects active involvement from the public sector as workforce literacy efforts take shape in the near future.

Looking ahead to that time, Kentucky’s path provides many right steps to follow.

“The number one thing was listening to and acting on the employers’ recommendations for success. They weren’t interested in any bureaucratic recommendations and neither were we,” King states.

“Coordination of input and advice from the business community is crucial. Targeting what will have the biggest impact is the way to go. You cannot afford to duplicate efforts ... and partnering with the right resources will also prove invaluable.”

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What ever form an Indiana program takes, King urges, “A measuring stick is so important, so setting goals is a must. Goals should be made to meet the statewide needs (not specific agencies). Then, everyone must be held accountable for reaching them.”

When it comes down to it, King says a state really has no alternative but to act and help its workforce adapt to changing demands.

“Without being able to properly compete in the business climate of today and tomorrow, employees face the possibility of job loss or lower wage levels, which impact not only workers but their entire families,” she states. “Employers may even be

forced to relocate to where the workforce is better able to meet their needs.

“Bottom line, education equals economic development.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Cheryl King at (502) 573-5114 or
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Kentucky Adult Education at <http://adulthood.state.ky.us/>

Indiana Chamber workforce basic skills study at
www.indianachamber.com