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PARTNER UP

Accelerating access and improving outcomes through partnership



THE SKILLS GAP

Although the Great Recession hit Northeast Ohio (NEO) hard, employment in manufacturing is rebounding and driving regional job growth. Productivity is increasing, and manufacturers are demanding a more highly skilled labor force. Manufacturing employment in the region has grown by more than 7 percent, or 8,400 jobs, since 2010, but many North East Ohioans are not adequately prepared to meet the requirements of these available openings. Forty-seven percent of Northeast Ohio adults have no education past high school and lack relevant job skills. Companies report challenges finding skilled workers to hire – a challenge exacerbated by retirements, emerging technology, and recent re-shoring (manufacturing jobs returning to the US). WorkAdvance, an initiative coordinated by Towards Employment across Northeast Ohio, offers a continuum of appropriately aligned, sector-specific workforce services that can successfully meet business needs and move low

WIRE-Net

Based in Cleveland, Ohio, WIRE-Net is dedicated to improving the community by supporting the manufacturing industry. With a membership of over 300 primarily small and medium-sized manufacturing businesses, WIRE-Net has been working on behalf of Northeast Ohio's manufacturing sector since 1989. Towards Employment approached WIRE-Net early in the development of the WorkAdvance program to leverage expertise in the design of the program. WIRE-Net engaged their business members to provide input into recruitment strategies, screening criteria, the identification of demand occupations and associated training programs and credentials, and on continuous improvement strategies for the initiative. This relationship became even deeper when WIRE-Net became a funded partner to lead job development activities in the manufacturing sector, and continue its advisory role.

WIRE-Net staff was contracted to work directly with businesses to vet candidates and make matches with jobs among its manufacturing stakeholders. TJ McGowan, WIRE-Net's Employment Specialist, has been dedicated to the project since it began and has a weekly meeting with

income individuals into quality jobs, with established career pathways and supports for advancement. This case-study explores a key WorkAdvance strategy—to accelerate access to businesses and improve programmatic outcomes through partnership with an industry association. Industry associations typically have well established relationships across member businesses that either work directly in or support a targeted sector. These businesses vary in number of employees, revenues, and footprint. Associations that have demonstrated a track record of developing services to meet the needs of their members and are willing to partner with community based organizations on workforce programs offer the potential to accelerate access to businesses and improve workforce outcomes for both business and job-seekers.

TE career coaches to review job opportunities, assess candidates, and suggest preparation to help make matches. "My role is to get companies engaged, gauge interest and skill needs of manufacturers, and try to connect WorkAdvance workers to job openings." McGowan's industry relationships and deep understanding of the needs of specific companies—such as unique work environments and customized equipment—has expedited placements. Towards Employment believed that WIRE-Net's relationships with businesses could help WorkAdvance staff more quickly develop industry knowledge and access information about open positions than if Towards Employment were to start developing new relationships. Business benefited as well—they were not asked to join a new advisory group or spend time getting to know a new account manager—McGowan remained their primary contact, but he now had access to new talent development resources.

WIRE-Net Executive Director John Colm says, "We're not a service provider to individuals. What we're really good at is managing employer relationships." With the input



WorkAdvance is coordinated by **Towards Employment**, a Cleveland-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to empower individuals to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency through employment. TE removes barriers and builds skills to help individuals to (re)enter the workforce, advance in their careers and achieve financial independence, while meeting the staffing needs of local employers. With a 37-member staff and an annual budget of \$3.7 million, TE has served more than 120,000 people in its nearly forty-year history.



WorkAdvance seeks to boost the earnings of unemployed and low-wage working adults by helping them obtain quality jobs in targeted sectors with opportunities for career growth. WorkAdvance prepares, trains, and places unemployed and low-wage workers in good quality jobs with established career tracks. After placement, the program continues to assist participants to help them advance in their chosen careers.

from WIRE-Net, WorkAdvance, as a service provider to individuals, was able to more efficiently recruit and prepare candidates who met the needs of WIRE-Net members. Ongoing wrap-around supports and post-placement career coaching contributes to strong job retention rates. Leveraging WIRE-Net's employer relationships and WorkAdvance's individual workforce development activities was a win-win.

Towards Employment regularly engaged WIRE-Net to support WorkAdvance programmatic components. In terms of screening, WIRE-Net members highlighted the need for drug screening early in the process. Their input also led to the inclusion of integrated manufacturing math and an overview of basic quality instruments into job readiness workshops. WIRE-Net staff and member companies reviewed potential training curriculum, recommended adjustments, and Towards Employment selected training partners to design technical skills training programs tailored to the needs of WIRE-Net businesses.

IMPACT

The Towards Employment/WIRE-Net partnership has benefited both organizations. Towards Employment has increased engagement with manufacturing companies and WIRE-Net has access to additional resources for workforce development. This has resulted in Towards Employment including manufacturing as a sector for a major U.S. Department of Labor Grant and contributed to WIRE-Net's successful bid for support from a local foundation for a new Apprenticeship Accelerator. Perhaps most importantly, 76 unique manufacturing companies have hired WorkAdvance participants.

“ Companies are flush with applications for entry-level workers, and it's sometimes hard for companies to wade through the applications and make good picks. But, TE does a good job to ensure the quality of their candidates, which provides value for our members. ”

—John Colm, Executive Director,
WIRE-Net

NEXT STEPS BEYOND WORKADVANCE

Towards Employment will continue to partner with WIRE-Net. The organizations have started developing a model to improve apprenticeship opportunities for TE participants while reducing high apprenticeship cancellation rates among manufacturing businesses. Additionally, WIRE-Net will play a key role in a new project to prepare individuals returning from prison for employment in manufacturing careers.



Towards Employment



WorkAdvance

¹ Economic Modeling Specialists, Inc, Analyst, accessed November 11, 2014

² National Skills Coalition Middle-Skill Jobs State-by-State. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Ohio-Middle-Skill-Fact-Sheet.pdf> on 11/7/14.