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**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 take 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).

**CLEVELAND INDUSTRIAL TRAINING CENTER**

Cleveland Industrial Training Center (CITC) is a private, for-profit training facility specializing in the training of CNC Machinists. For over 20 years, CITC offers students the opportunity to work within a working machine shop. In addition to training for job-seekers, CITC offers customized training to companies to enhance the skills of incumbent workers. Prior to WorkAdvance, Towards Employment had worked sporadically with CITC; primarily because few of its clientele were able to meet the rigorous math on the entrance exam, as well as the limited availability of tuition supports and inability to manage part time work with the existing training schedules. With the collaboration built through WorkAdvance, Towards Employment and CITC successfully piloted a number of solutions to address these challenges and increased access to this in-demand training, leading to improved employment outcomes for those who otherwise would have been stuck in low wage jobs. In the first attempt to increase access to CITC training, Towards Employment asked CITC to create a program that prepared individuals for entry-level CNC Operator jobs rather than their more typical CNC Machining jobs. Towards Employment vetted the new curriculum with industry partners to make sure it retained value in the job market.

**WorkAdvance**, offers a continuum of appropriately aligned, sector-specific workforce services that can successfully meet business needs and move low income individuals into quality jobs, with established career pathways and supports for advancement. This case-study explores a key WorkAdvance strategy—to customize cohort training to increase access and success for low-income populations. Low-skill job-seekers are often unable to access demand driven training programs due to literacy and numeracy levels, time and financial constraints, or insufficient support while in training. This case study provides an example of how a flexible technical training provider in partnership with a workforce initiative like WorkAdvance can address these challenges.

The advantage of this partnership is that with support for continued advancement after initial employment, graduates would progress along the pathway with on the job experience and potentially additional classroom training to gain the higher level positions. While the 8-week program offered a new approach to increasing access, WorkAdvance aimed to place participants directly into higher wage jobs in machining, and employers continued to be interested in the higher skilled candidates, so two additional approaches were tested:

- Participants who could not pass the entrance exam were given access to Tooling University, an online manufacturing program with math modules. Both WorkAdvance Career coaches and the CITC instructor were able to monitor students’ progress, and support sessions were available for those who needed more personal interaction to get through the material. Individuals who successfully completed the Tooling U modules by the required deadline were able to retest and start the more robust CITC training.

- For those participants who tested close to the admission threshold for the 7-week program, CITC agreed to allow them to enter the program rather than being forced to wait for the next class and retest, if they agreed to participate in additional tutoring and/or additional hands-on training alongside the traditional program. WorkAdvance Career Coaches and CITC staff helped to ensure that these participants had the necessary support to catch up to their peers and ultimately succeed in the class.

Each of these approaches yielded positive results. A key factor was the use of a cohort model, e.g. WorkAdvance students participated in their own class. This allowed for maximum flexibility of scheduling and customizing curriculum, as well as ease of access for the WorkAdvance Career Coach to provide support to all those enrolled in CITC at one time, and to communicate with the instructor about their progress. CITC instructors were excellent partners in monitoring progress and sharing information about any circumstance that could potentially derail a student’s success, so that the WorkAdvance coach could intervene where possible. CITC has been willing and able to accommodate these modifications to its traditional way of operating, because WorkAdvance delivers a reliable pool of training candidates that succeed in training. As a service provider with strength supporting participants along a pathway, Towards Employment’s WorkAdvance program has improved the pipeline of students who attend CITC training. “We didn’t initially have high expectations for WorkAdvance participants. There are a lot of barriers for them. That proved to be a bad assumption. Now, we will take risks to accept WorkAdvance students into our program that we would not take on other applicants” says Tim Duffy, CITC President. The pipeline has been so stable that CITC has been willing to negotiate tuition based upon economies of scale created by the reliability and persistence of WorkAdvance participants.

**IMPACT**

In addition to considering refinements to the admission process, and the way in which students are supported throughout the training, CITC has accommodated other efforts to increase access to nontraditional students. CITC has provided a flexible course schedule that is better for many WorkAdvance participants, added mid-day classes to accommodate multiple shifts, and provided dedicated one-on-one assistance to help WorkAdvance students succeed in class.

Additionally, CITC has been willing to run training cohorts with reduced numbers to help WorkAdvance launch training without the delays of extended recruiting to meet enrollment numbers. Each of these factors contributes to increased access for lower-skill participants to get started and identify the pathway to get to the full skill-set. WorkAdvance are quickly placed into good paying jobs ranging from $12-$14/ hour.

**NEXT STEPS BEYOND WORKADVANCE**

Given the success of this partnership, WorkAdvance hopes to expand CITC training to other programs within Towards Employment. WorkAdvance staff is working to develop and support supplemental training for graduates—such as Swiss Machining—that can expand participant’s advancement opportunities. To support this training, both organizations are investigating a co-funding model to continue the work beyond the scope of the WorkAdvance grant. This could involve the incorporation of employer support for tuition and leveraged public support.

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