

## **Key Learnings From the Aug. 29 Meeting: Improving the Connections between Industry Clusters & The Workforce System**

The Cluster Network Leadership Council meeting on the connections between clusters and the workforce system shed light on some of the areas where we can use improvement. The need for modularized training programs, more regional approaches to providing workforce development assistance, greater flexibility in the use of state grants for workforce training, greater visibility and understanding about Oregon's traded sector industries among the general public, and ways to find replacement workers as the baby boomers retire are all issues that currently cause employers concern. Gaps also seem to occur between the workforce system and Oregon's employers that could be improved by asking business leaders to increase their participation in classrooms and academic settings, contribute to curriculum development, and come to common agreements on the qualifications, skills, and experience expected of quality job applicants.

Two panels (one of cluster practitioners and one of workforce providers), the Leadership Council's roundtable discussion, and the general comments from the Aug.29 meeting attendees led to a series of suggestions for improving these connections. (Refer to the Aug.29 Presenter's Notes on [www.oregonclusters.org/network](http://www.oregonclusters.org/network) for further details.)

The results of the Manufacturing 21 Coalition's survey results, WSI's Metals Manufacturing Survey and Needs Assessment Findings, and the Report to Governor Kulongoski from the Oregon Workforce Investment Board's Manufacturing Workforce Committee also offer great insight into some of the steps that can be taken to better connect the workforce system with industry's needs. (See the Aug.29 Meeting Materials on [www.oregonclusters.org/network](http://www.oregonclusters.org/network) to download these reports)

### **Suggestions:**

#### *Involve Business Leaders in Academic Instruction*

Industry leaders can play a bigger role in the educational system by speaking to classes of all types and all levels about concrete business opportunities and applications for academic skills and knowledge. Industry should seek out opportunities to connect with schools on company tours, job shadows, career fairs, field trips, etc. Clusters can set up opportunities to educate students about potential job opportunities within the industry. The [Metals Industry Consortium's 2005 EXPO](#) provides one example.

#### *Increase Internship Opportunities*

Increase internship opportunities within Oregon companies. The Multiple Engineering Cooperative Program and the Civil Engineering Cooperative Program ([MECOP and CECOP](#)) at Oregon State University (OSU) demonstrate the power of an effective business/education partnership and provide examples of internship programs for engineering students. The [Business Education Compact](#) also offers a year-round internship placement service with local businesses for high school and college students.

### Form Common Agreements on Worker Readiness Standards & Certifications

Avoid serendipity in employers' choice of employees. Ask employers within clusters to agree on common sets of skill needs, performance measures, and screening tools so training programs and certificates actually have value/ signify to an employer that an applicant is qualified and prepared to work. Create the demand from industry for certain types of certifications and trainings. Program participants need to know that certifications will give them a leg-up and be worth their time. Without support and endorsement from industry of training programs and certificates, the programs will be undermined and ineffective. Look at other states that have implemented certificate programs effectively (Kentucky and Michigan).

### Modularize Training

Increase emphasis on modularized training. Community college classes require employee time that companies can't spare. Training programs should be flexible to allow for variation in economic cycles and classes should be held in evenings or on weekends.

### Include Education System Staff in Economic/Workforce Development Discussions

Invite School Superintendents and other K-12 education system decision-makers to be a part of economic development and workforce meetings and discussions.

### Address Upcoming Labor Shortages

Think of innovative solutions for finding replacement workers and preventing labor shortages as the Baby Boomers retire. Some suggestions include:

-Evaluate and redefine legal requirements for "retirement" so baby-boomers can continue work part-time or as mentors/trainers after retiring. Change definitions so that retiring workers can gradually decrease hours or commitment and leave transition time, rather than losing workers overnight

-Develop disenfranchised worker pools (people with disabilities or minority groups)

(See the Society for Human Resource Management's article, "[The Truth about the Coming Labor Shortage](#)" in *HR Magazine* for a further look at this issue.)

### Improve Industry Understanding and Image

Clusters can improve communications with kids and parents about industry goals, opportunities, salary ranges, and the variety of careers that are available. Help the general public understand the role that traded sector companies play in Oregon's economy as well as the breadth of opportunity available within a cluster. A series of focus groups, perhaps putting high school students, employers and workforce "providers" together, might help move this forward. If they were done by region, they could help individual players connect in practical ways as well.

At the next Cluster Network meeting on October 5, the Leadership Council will discuss the steps the Cluster Network can take to further advance the connections between clusters and the workforce system.