



## Workforce Development and Education Systems Face Major Changes

By Roy Vanderford

The modern era of “workforce development” traces its roots back to the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of the 1960s and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of the 1970s. These federal workforce programs were followed by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of the 1980s, which established a stronger role for employers via “private industry councils,” and the 1990-era Workforce Investment Act (WIA) that emphasized service/funding coordination via “one stop centers.” It is apparent to me that we are about to enter another milestone transition, one that will greatly affect employers, the workforce, as well as professionals in the system. The changes that I foresee will be shaped by these factors:



**Agility.** More than ever, the workforce system must rapidly respond to changing situations. The next three years will probably be the most volatile period ever faced by the workforce development system. It will be marked by economic restructuring, continuing high unemployment, political unrest, and severe constraints on public spending. To be successful, state and regional leaders must be prepared to navigate this environment skillfully and will need new models of employer and community engagement to do so. Traditional models of strategic planning resulting in changes at the margins will not suffice in this environment. We will need to act with speed in “acting our way to a new plan” instead of “planning for new ways of acting.”

**The federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) will change, perhaps substantially.** Congress will soon either reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act with significant restructuring or will replace this act outright. Originally enacted in 1998 as a five-year law, a review of this program is long overdue. While federal policy makers will reshape and fund this program, the core issues faced by employers and job seekers will remain at the state, regional and community levels. The workforce development system – employers, staff, educators and the economic development community -- must be prepared for major transitions requiring new partnerships, new political alliances, and the use of new technology. Given the current federal budget discussions, doing more with less will be the rule of the day.

**Skill certifications will drive the system.** Skill certifications are rapidly becoming the currency for both hiring by employers and advancement in progressive levels of education. Employers are placing much higher value on whether its workers come to them ready to work with the specific skills needed for the job rather than general degrees. They’re looking at the demonstration of skills through the prism of work experience or specialized training. In addition, education systems are rapidly developing and deploying “stackable certificates” to define articulation agreements and to accelerate students’ degree attainment. This trend includes the increased practice of allowing adult students to “test out” of courses where they already have competencies achieved on the job or via industry-specific training. Finally, the high cost of college has led many students to begin their training through lower-cost industry-defined certifications or at community colleges, where credits earned are then transferred to higher-cost institutions. Successful workforce development programs will need to be adept at managing a certification-driven system with stronger partnerships among employers, community colleges and



technical schools, while providing better transitional guidance for workers who are laid off and receiving unemployment compensation.

***Technology will continue to change the way we find jobs and acquire training.*** Employers are increasingly using a variety of job boards and social media sites to search for talent, and states are working to have greater relevance to employers in a crowded field of sites. Improvements in state platforms provide the opportunity for numerous applications that are customer-friendly and cost-effective at a time when customers increasingly expect 24/7 service access with high functionality. Advances in instructional technology will also lead to an increase in on-line training and educational offerings. Greater use of skill certifications and new technology will enable workforce development staffs to offer more creative and attractive options to laid-off workers and to the employers who hire them. Community colleges and technical schools are already working to increase on-line access for workers impacted by the movement of jobs overseas and to use improved technology to attract, retain, track, and ultimately place candidates. Workforce development staffs will need to be well versed in the new tools and technologies and be able to assist staff and system customers in applying them in ways that connect seamlessly to services offered through one-stop centers.

***Regional Leadership.*** The key partners in the workforce development world must continue their work at strategically thinking and acting at the regional level. Regional sector-based leadership will be the hallmark among workforce investment board and their partners in economic development and education. The workforce boards must strategically plan for talent development and retention as a primary asset for regional economic growth. New leadership skills will be necessary to develop joint planning processes aimed at partnership building with economic development and education officials. From these strategic partnerships, it will be essential to engage employers on a sector-by-sector basis in new and creative ways that demonstrate a clear menu of value-added services, customer-friendly access points, and joint solutions involving multiple agencies and funding sources. Business contact programs must be refined and re-invented to provide new level of efficiency in providing information to employers and in coordinated responsiveness for solutions to their needs.

The current environment is a source of anxiety for everyone in the system. For workers and employers, the overall job market along with much discussed yet not realized growth areas such as “green jobs” provide great anxiety. It is also an uncertain time for workforce development and education staffs as anticipated funding cutbacks threaten both their jobs and their resources for serving their customers at a time of increased service demands and high stress. We cannot allow the current uncertainty to lead to paralysis. Rather, it is a time when new ideas and new partnerships need to flourish in the environment that is described above.

The issues related to skills and education deficits, along with related barriers of drug abuse and deteriorating family support structures, will not go away. A high school dropout is likely to enter a life of poverty, and a high school graduate lacking a post-secondary credential is increasingly unlikely to enter the middle class, as we have known it. Leadership at the state and local levels to craft solutions and communicate key messages to employers and to the public has never been more important than it is now.

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