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Labor force blueprint takes aim at education, job skills

BY ETHAN FORMAN STAFF WRITER Dec 25, 2014



SALEM — If you apply for an entry-level job like bank teller, carpenter, medical assistant or machinist, be prepared to put on your thinking cap and hone your skills.

Education and job skills — and the need to improve them— were themes that ran through new studies looking at the North Shore's labor market, the 2015 "Labor Market Blueprint" and the "Economic Development Snapshot," which were released by the North Shore Workforce Investment Board last week month.

"The importance of foundation skills such as English communication skills, basic math skills, basic and intermediate technology skills, working with supervision, and work ethic was cited by nearly every employer interviewed for this Labor Force Blueprint," according to the report.

The first snapshot written since 2010, it takes stock of the region that is showing growth after the long recession.

"It's the only resource for the entire North Shore that discusses the labor market demands in the region," said Mary Sarris, the executive director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board.

The blueprint's findings help drive the region's educational offerings at the North Shore Career Centers, which provide services and training to job seekers. It's important to match the skills companies need with the education and training being offered.

"If companies can't find the people with the skills they need, they can't possibly compete," Sarris said.

An education-business partnership

The North Shore Workforce Investment Board's chief elected official is Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll and its chairman is Nancy Huntington Stager. The WIB oversees the workforce development policy and state and federal workforce programs for 19 cities in towns on the North Shore. The board partners with schools, colleges, training providers, public organizations and businesses on workforce development initiatives and grants.

Sarris said the blueprint showed the need by employers for a higher skill level than even five years ago. In speaking with companies, even those in construction, the need for basic computer skills stood out.

"Microsoft Office is a basic skill, nowadays," Sarris said. "You can't be a carpenter if you don't know Excel," Sarris said, speaking about the popular Microsoft computer spreadsheet program.

The blueprint serves as a road map for how state and federal training dollars might be invested, or how to work with local high schools or colleges and universities on the skill students might need.

The North Shore Workforce Investment Board also collaborates with the nonprofit North Shore Alliance for Economic Development, which is based at the Enterprise Center at Salem State University. Its outgoing executive director, Gary Barrett, created the companion report, the "North Shore Investment Snapshot," looking at the labor market from an economic development perspective. This snapshot involves interviews with business leaders on growth activity and investments in "construction, creative economy, financial services, health care, life sciences/bioscience, local foods, manufacturing and tourism."

Some key findings

That need for an educated workforce will pose a challenge moving forward, according to the blueprint, authored by economic development consultant O. Steven Quimby.

“Higher-wage jobs have demonstrated the greatest growth and mid-level jobs continue to be the slowest growing in the region,” the blueprint states. “However, since employers are not hiring at substantial levels, they can be more stringent in demanding highly qualified new hires. At the same time, employers are demanding ever-higher skills and education levels, even for entry-level jobs.”

Innovation was also a key theme of the blueprint, finding that since 1976, nearly 14,400 patents have been issued to inventors on the North Shore, at companies like Osram Sylvania, Varian Semiconductor and New England Biolabs. With the opportunities in innovation comes the need for a strong educational foundation in science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, fields.

The critical industries to the North Shore are construction, financial services, health care and durable goods manufacturing, With that, the blueprint’s authors made these observations:

— Construction has lost 4.73 percent of its employment in the past 10 years, but the industry appears poised for a turnaround. The blueprint suggests boosting recruitment to an industry in which a majority of positions do not require a bachelor’s degree.

— Financial services has served as a critical industry since 2007, and the education requirements for entry-level jobs like bank tellers “have increased dramatically and are likely to continue to increase.” Information technology requirements for financial services, both from a customer and a regulatory standpoint, are also in demand.

— Health care, one of the largest private sectors on the North Shore, continued to grow, even during the recession. The Affordable Care Act has both increased the number of consumers seeking health care and the requirement health care providers provide quality care. The “increasing use of technology” in health care is also driving the demand for skills and education.

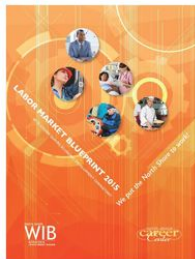
“Most health care occupations are likely to see increasing numbers of jobs as the health care industry sees increasing demand for services due to the aging population and the increasing patient population,” the blueprint states.

Durable goods manufacturing has shed employment over the past decade, but it still a critical industry on the North Shore, and more needs to be done to tout this. While “low value-added manufacturing work” has dwindled, there is a demand for advanced manufacturing, which demands a high skill level, but also fetches a high wage.

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Job skills report blueprint
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Job skills snapshot
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