



Greenville Works: A Workforce Development Strategy that Lives Up to Its Name

THE ORGANIZATION:

Greenville Works

Greenville, South Carolina

THE CHALLENGE:

- » Ensure that Greenville County is positioned for long-term economic success by developing and implementing a next-generation workforce development strategy

KEY COMPONENTS:

- » Establish a collaborative of 12 public and private sector agencies spanning education, workforce development, economic development, and public policy to help new and existing businesses meet their workforce and business growth needs
- » Promote Career Readiness Certificates (CRCs), credentials that are used across all sectors of the economy and certify the following skills:
 - › Problem solving
 - › Critical thinking
 - › Reading and using work-related text
 - › Applying information from workplace documents to solve problems
 - › Applying mathematical reasoning to work-related problems
 - › Setting up and performing work-related mathematical calculations
 - › Locating, synthesizing, and applying information that is presented graphically
 - › Comparing, summarizing, and analyzing information presented in multiple, related graphics
- » Provide a variety of classroom assistance opportunities

for job seekers who wish to build their skills, earn a CRC, or improve to a higher-level CRC

- » Offer job profiling services for employers who wish to establish minimum skill levels for specific jobs
- » Recruit employers in Greenville and surrounding counties to sign a letter of commitment indicating they will recognize, request, or require a registered Career Readiness Certificate
- » Join the National Fund for Workforce Solutions by establishing a nine-member regional workforce collaborative to focus on jobs within the transportation manufacturing sector

THE RESULTS (as of January 1, 2012):

Statewide:

- » More than 150,000 South Carolinians have earned a CRC
- » More than 800 jobs have been profiled
- » More than 250 employers recognize, request, or require a CRC from job applicants

Greenville:

- » More than 7,200 individuals have earned a CRC
- » More than 75 employers in the region recognize, request, or require a CRC from job applicants
- » The Greenville Region Workforce Collaborative has generated funding pledges of \$1.9 million over two years to help build foundational skills training for job seekers in transportation manufacturing
- » In August 2011, the project director of Greenville Works testified at a meeting of the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training about the success of the partnership and offered suggestions for others seeking workforce solutions
- » The Workforce Readiness Council established by area members of the Greenville Society for Human Resource Management was awarded a 2010 Pinnacle Award

OVERVIEW

When Greenville Works launched in the summer of 2009, the vision was to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to next-generation workforce development in Greenville County. The leaders defined four areas of improvement:

- » Using business community feedback to understand needs
- » Using that feedback to work with educators to develop curricula to meet those needs
- » Providing career-related information to youth and adult populations to ensure their understanding of business needs
- » Building strong, sector-based workforce development programs to ensure a solid pool of skilled employees

Today, the following organizations are working together to help new and existing businesses meet their workforce and business growth needs:

- » Education
 - › Greenville County Schools
 - › Greenville Technical College
- » Workforce development
 - › Greenville County Workforce Investment Board
 - › Personal Pathways to Success
 - › readySC (a division of the South Carolina Technical College System)
 - › SC Works (South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce)
 - › United Way of Greenville County
- » Economic development and public policy
 - › City of Greenville
 - › Greenville Area Development Corporation
 - › Greenville Chamber of Commerce
 - › South Carolina Manufacturing Extension Partnership

THE CHALLENGE

The first step: gather information from area employers. Through the group's Business Retention and Expansion Program, Greenville Works executive director John Baker visited more than 250 businesses. According to Laura Harmon, project director for Greenville Works, "We found that employers were nearly unanimous in their stated need to build a skilled workforce, train and develop that workforce, and find new employees who had the skills to step in and be successful. We also heard the message loud

and clear that area businesses would be requiring workers with a wider variety of skill sets than in the past."

Given these identified needs, Greenville Works began looking at WorkKeys® assessments and certification as a way to establish a "strong, solid, valid, and reliable measure of workers' skills," says Harmon. Greenville Works staff and partner agencies began promoting certification to the general public with a particular focus on the unemployed and underemployed.

At the same time, Greenville Works recognized that job seekers willing to take assessments and earn a CRC needed an incentive—the prospect of a job. So Greenville Works staff and partners began reaching out to employers to inform them of the advantages of hiring certified workers. "We worked on both aspects at the same time," says Harmon. "With area employers, we built awareness first and then asked for a commitment. We offered three choices: recognize, request, or require a CRC from applicants. And then we made sure to list these employers on the South Carolina statewide support list so job seekers would know the employers who would value their credential."

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS FOCUSING ON JOB SEEKERS

Convincing job seekers to prepare for and take the assessments to earn a CRC was an early objective. Key to increasing certifications was the existing availability of preparation and assessment sites. The Greenville County Workforce Investment Board (WIB) played a lead role in expanding services, assessing job seekers, offering assessments to employers, and footing the bill for high school students to earn a CRC. "Their resources, provided through SC Works with local WIB leadership, remain essential to the success of WorkKeys in Greenville," says Harmon.

In South Carolina, local school systems are responsible for lifelong learning for individuals 17 and older. Ann Nickles, coordinator of workplace programs for Greenville County Schools, the largest district in the state, reports that Greenville County Schools has been a WorkKeys and CRC believer for many years. "All custodians, food service personnel, teacher aides, plant engineers, groundskeepers, and other hourly personnel are required to take ACT workplace assessments. So it was a natural fit for the district's Lifelong Learning Center to begin offering a course built around WorkKeys and earning a Certificate."

"We held our first class in 2007—even before Greenville Works was launched. We designed it to fit within a week, by offering five half-day classes that run from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Our average class size is about 15, but we can

handle as many as 25,” says Nickles. The charge is \$20, which includes training time and materials, the assessments, and a CRC for those who qualify.

Center staff administer a pretest on Monday to check current skill levels. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, the class focuses on one WorkKeys assessment subject per day, with practice tests at the end of each day. Friday is WorkKeys testing day, and results are available that afternoon. “Our classes are entirely teacher directed,” says Nickles. “We provide a lot of one-on-one assistance, and class members also help each other depending on their individual skill levels. We give practice tests at the end of each day so class members can see how they’re progressing. And we explain the test results Friday afternoon along with the meaning of each Certificate level.”

Terry Culbertson, a corporate trainer/facilitator at Greenville Schools’ Lifelong Learning Center, is a classroom teacher and dedicated “street evangelist” for WorkKeys testing. Terry has been known to stand on the sidewalk outside the state unemployment office in Greenville and talk to people lined up to apply for services. She shouts out questions to the crowd, like “Would anyone here like to work at Michelin, or Nestle, or Itron? How about a job at the school district, or Covidien/First Quality? Well, guess what, you won’t even get an interview without a CRC. What’s a CRC and how do you earn one? I can help you.” Culbertson adds, “I tell them that more than 75 area employers know about the Certificate and value it. I tell them that even if they haven’t taken a test in a long while, we can help them get ready. I tell them that they need me and I need them, and then I tell them about our five-day class and how to enroll.” As demand for the class rises, Nickles and Culbertson schedule more sessions.

“We probably do more for their self-confidence than we do for their academic skills,” says Nickles. “It’s great to see classmates encourage each other. Many of them are middle-aged adults who have been out of school awhile and have lost their jobs. They relate well to each other, work together, and get really excited about taking the assessments and earning their Certificate.” For the five-month period between July and December 2011, 85% of test takers at the Center earned a CRC.

Other options exist as well for job seekers in the Greenville area. Goodwill Industries offers a weeklong class for \$25, taught at the school district’s Lifelong Learning Center, to anyone in a Goodwill program. If a longer class is needed, the Greenville Literacy Association—also a partnering agency—offers a more extensive six-week class culminating in WorkKeys assessments to earn a CRC. If an individual feels they are ready to take the assessments without classroom instruction, they may go to the local SC Works office.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS FOCUSING ON EMPLOYERS

As part of the process of interviewing area employers for their workforce needs and priorities, Greenville Works and partner agency staff members spoke with employers about WorkKeys assessments and CRC credentials. “Some were already familiar with the notion, but many were not,” says Harmon. “The challenge starts with building awareness and eventually, we ask each employer to commit to a level of support. Once they commit to recognize, request, or require a CRC from applicants, we publicize that employer’s name for the benefit of job seekers hoping to apply to that company or organization.”

An early adopter committing to require a CRC was Itron, a provider of energy and water resource management solutions. Itron’s plant in West Union, about an hour west of Greenville, employs more than 750 full-time employees to design and build meters to measure electricity use. Itron has profiled 35 job positions representing 100% of its hourly production positions. When job openings are posted, applicants—both internally and externally—must have the required skills defined by the position profile to apply.

“Itron believes WorkKeys is a valuable tool not only for our employees, but also in workforce development and employment,” says Sue Gray, Itron’s human resources manager. “Hourly positions are among the hardest to hire. We may know an applicant’s work history and that they have manufacturing experience, but we also need to know whether they have the skill sets to perform the jobs at our plant. This program has given us that knowledge.” Today, there are 21 employers in South Carolina with 500 or more employees each who recognize (11), request (2), or require (8) a CRC, and hundreds more with employee counts under 500.

Harmon reports that employer input remains vital to the work of Greenville Works partner agencies. “We continue to visit with up to 150 employers every year to ensure that we are addressing their workforce needs and adjusting to any changes that may be on the horizon.”

FUNDING

Harmon reports that United Way of Greenville County has had a major influence in the success of Greenville Works. “Our goals are very much aligned, so it just made sense to partner with Greenville Works,” says Tamela Spann, community investment manager for United Way.

United Way has helped fund the project from its inception. United Way dollars are used primarily to fund staff members at Greenville Works and partner agencies. The funds help pay the cost to recruit and train residents of the service area and to help pay for assessments and Certificates.

“Our ultimate workforce goal,” says Spann, “is to move people to work. People cannot be financially secure or stable if they don’t have employment. We want to address the barriers that prevent people from becoming employed, and we want to help our employers find qualified workers.”

Six of the Greenville Works partner agencies, along with three additional funding partners, applied for and received a National Fund for Workforce Solutions grant in 2011. The Greenville Region Workforce Collaborative chose to focus on the growing number of transportation manufacturing businesses in the area. The cumulative funding to date for this initiative, including matching funds from partner agencies, is more than \$1.9 million over two years.

This collaborative supports foundational skills training for job seekers in today’s high-tech manufacturing world, where computer skills, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and an understanding of workflow is essential. The stated goal is to train about 500 people for entry-level positions in automotive, aviation, and rail manufacturing. To be considered for the six-week training program, applicants must have a Silver-level Career Readiness Certificate or higher.

The funding partners of the Greenville Region Workforce Collaborative include:

- » Appalachian Regional Commission
- » Community Foundation of Greenville
- » Greenville Area Development Corporation
- » Greenville Chamber of Commerce
- » Greenville County Workforce Investment Board
- » Greenville Technical College
- » Hollingsworth Foundation
- » Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- » National Fund for Workforce Solutions / Social Innovation Fund
- » readySC
- » South Carolina Appalachian Council of Governments
- » United Way of Greenville County

John Baker, Greenville Works executive director, says, “If we can make this work for the transportation manufacturers in our region, we can apply this model to a number of other industry sectors, benefiting employers and job seekers across our service area.”

THE VALUE OF COLLABORATION

Tamela Spann of United Way describes the interagency collaboration in Greenville this way: “It has been encouraging to see so much cooperation among so many different levels and so many different sectors. When it comes to bringing a better quality of life to Greenville County, we all share the same goal. When we come together for a meeting, everyone takes off the hat of the organization, agency, or business they represent and just gets down to how we can make a difference. The level of collaboration has been very refreshing.”

Ann Nickles of Greenville County Schools adds, “Greenville Works has done a tremendous job of creating collaboration among agencies. This program has done more for the people of this area than any other project we’ve been involved in.”

Laura Harmon of Greenville Works says, “We’re still a long way from where we would like to be, and we’ll keep working to get there.” In her testimony before the Congressional Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training in August 2011, Harmon stated:

Not only does the WorkKeys-based Career Readiness Certificate give employers in any industry a verified, unbiased assessment of workers’ skills in applied math, reading, and graphs, it gives the students and adults who earn it a means to prove their work-related skills to employers.

The buy-in and participation of employers cannot be underestimated. The real motivator that results in job seekers preparing for and taking the assessments is not Greenville Works’ message that it is a smart thing to do; it is the employers who ask, ‘Have you earned your Certificate?’ In fact, many companies such as Michelin North America require the Certificate as they hire certain positions.

Because of employers’ use, backed by the education, workforce, and economic development communities’ support at the state and local levels, we have seen a 30% annual increase in the number of Greenville County job seekers, students, and incumbent workers earning the Certificate. We anticipate an even higher-percentage increase going forward.



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Learn more at WWW.ACT.ORG/WORKFORCE

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