

EMSI Helps RWA Reshape Workforce Training Approach

NOVEMBER 20TH, 2009

In southeastern Wisconsin, the methods and strategies that have been used in workforce development for years are changing. By emphasizing skills-based training rather than educational attainment, a cross-section of groups is seeking to put businesses, educators, and jobseekers on the same page.

RWA LOOKS AT DEMAND-SIDE COMPETENCY NEEDS

Over the past few years Milwaukee-area employers, education providers, and workforce/economic development professionals have come to agree that the region's approach to workforce training needs an update. The old system relied on helping jobseekers attain degrees or certificates rather than communicating with businesses about the sorts of competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities, or KSAs) they really need.

To pave the way to a new workforce development strategy, a collaboration of southeastern Wisconsin organizations known as the [Regional Workforce Alliance](#) developed a unique and comprehensive "competency" study to take a closer look at the area's skills needs.

EMSI WORKS WITH RWA TO IDENTIFY FOCUS INDUSTRIES AND IN-DEMAND COMPETENCIES

To accomplish this new vision, EMSI and project partners I-Open and Regionerate worked with RWA to:

- Explore a broad range of industries and occupations and understand their overall impact and importance to the nine-county region, which included northeastern Illinois;
- Organize the target occupations into either "production" occupations (those that are more technically oriented) or "service" occupations (those that are more socially oriented) to get a sense of the general orientation of the workers in the region;
- Analyze the competencies of the target occupations (using EMSI's [Career Pathways](#) tool) to come up with an understanding of the relevant competencies (a.k.a. KSAs) for the region.
- Focus on how the core competencies can help planners in the postsecondary education system develop career pathways and guides for career transitions.

An Example

To illustrate the importance of a new workforce training approach, Patricia Adrian—RWA's research specialist/project manager—uses an example of an opening for a crew leader at a local production facility. The job calls for a college degree and project management certification, and a few area educational institutions help workers attain these certificates. But when it comes time to apply, qualified job applicants "don't 'feel' right for the position," Adrian says. After making the hire, the employer realizes its new crew leader has not been adequately trained, so it is faced with two options—reopen the job search or perform unplanned on-the-job training.

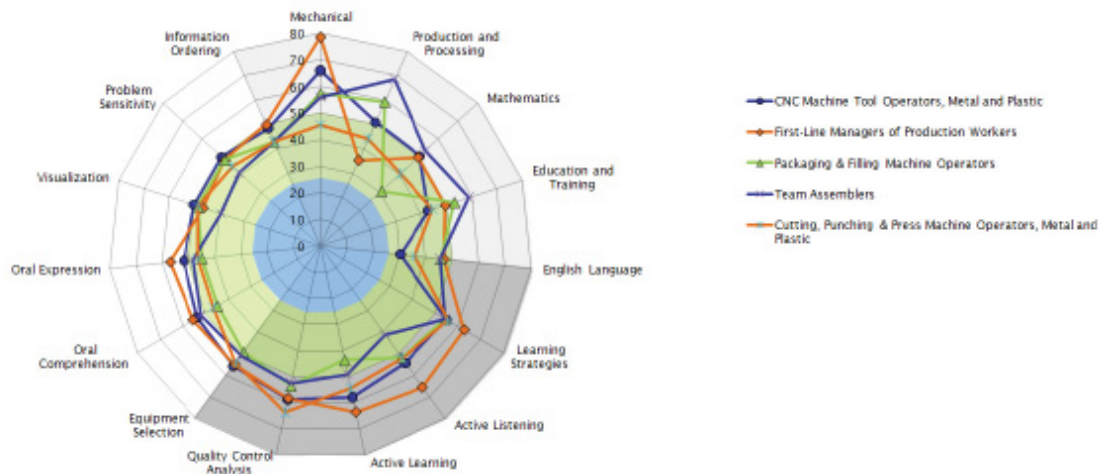
Adrian sums up the situation this way, "The employee is frustrated by their limitations when it seemed they had all the right qualifications. Educational institutions continue their existing programs of study, unaware that their students/graduates are falling short in the eyes of community businesses."

By switching the focus to competencies rather than educational attainment, businesses can more easily find employees that fulfill their job requirements and workers can be more flexible in an uncertain job market.

VISUALIZING THE DATA

A part of the analysis that a lot of people found interesting was that work that EMSI did with “radar charts,” which help decision-makers actually “see” the core competencies of occupations under consideration. According to Mike Mortell, RWA WIRED coordinator, “The radar charts really tell the story. You could see the skills that are needed for different careers, different occupations. ... I just think it’s a powerful tool.”

FIGURE 1.3: TOP 15 KSA VALUES FOR INDIVIDUAL PRODUCTION OCCUPATIONS, GROUP TWO



The charts are just one component of what Mortell and Patricia Adrian, RWA’s research specialist/project manager, hope will be a springboard to develop a common language that employers, educators, and workforce boards can use for linking students to jobseekers via the appropriate skills and knowledge. Applications for the data and charts include at career guidance level in high schools, one-stop job centers, and among program developers at colleges.

“We need new ways of communicating the complex competencies—knowledge, skills, and abilities—that characterize emerging occupations and new career pathways,” *wrote Ed Morrison*, a partner on the project and member of the Purdue Center for Regional Development. He and others contend that the work done with RWA is a good first step in the challenging process.

The RWA competency study can be viewed [here](#).

If you are interested in a similar project for your region, contact Hamilton Galloway at hamilton@economicmodeling.com or call 208.883.3500.