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Commentary

BUILDING A WORKFORCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



By Thomas J. Donohue, President and CEO, U.S. Chamber of Commerce
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You may have heard President Bush in his State of the Union address talk about the critical need to improve workforce training to prepare our nation's employees for 21st century jobs. We welcome that message because a skilled workforce is fundamental to the survival of America's small businesses.

As a manager, you know that competition is fierce and that you can't compete if your pool of employees is not equipped to keep up with change in today's economy. Yet, only 20% of American workers have the skills for new jobs. In fact, in order just to keep their current jobs, 75% of today's workforce needs to be retrained. And 80% of all jobs now require some type of education beyond high school (including vocational training and certification).

The training our workers receive isn't adequate for the tasks we need them to do. But different parts of the community can work together to change that. Community colleges, public training resources, and business organizations in need of skills training can be found in every community. Competitive communities are recognizing that life-long learning, or skills training, is a commitment by business, educators, and workforce systems to ensure their economic health.

The average community college student is 29 years old, transitioning into a new career or building skills to stay competitive in an existing one. Actually, the fastest growing segment of new community college students is professionals who already have a four-year degree! This makes the community college curriculum an ideal incubator for tomorrow's workforce. We need the business community, through institutions like the local chambers of commerce, to partner with schools to develop a market-responsive training system capable of filling in the skills gap.

The U.S. Chamber's Center for Workforce Preparation (CWP) is already engaged in efforts along the lines of those suggested by President Bush. Together with the American Association of Community Colleges, CWP is creating a comprehensive guide for building effective workforce development partnerships. Through regional forums with community colleges, public workforce systems, and business, we have created a national dialogue on shared workforce priorities that highlight particularly relevant models of market-responsive community colleges. The guide will capture these models of promising practices from across the country to help communities generate market-responsive strategies that meet their labor needs.

America needs a trained workforce to remain competitive. You need trained workers to compete. Building and using a market-responsive workforce development system are wise investments in your business. The ROI is extraordinary, especially considering that many of these resources already exist in your community at no or low cost. It's a rapidly changing, competitive economy. Workforce training is an investment your business can't afford not to make.

Learn more about this effort and other workforce trends on CWP's Web site at
<http://www.uschamber.com/cwp/strategies/colleges/>.

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