

OCL Study Session, April 22 at ProLiteracy

Attendees: Kimberly Armani, Zach Becker, Bruce Hamm, Carol Hill, Heidi Holtz, Peter Knoblock, Robert Leslie, Don MacLaughlin, Melissa Menon, Laura Miller, Rhonda O'Connor, Frank Ridzi, Tim Riehlman, Dominic Robinson, Isaac Rothwell, Mike Sattler, Honora Spillane, Mary Thompson, Randy Wolken

OCL: Co-chairs Barbara Carranti and Ben Lockwood; Sandra Barrett; Renée K. Gadoua

Kim Armani (SUNY Oswego Metro Center) and Laura Miller (Darco Mfg) led a discussion with several local employers. Issues included recruitment, employment and training.

Panelists: John Westin (Dannan Tool and Machine Co., four employees); Bill Cullen, president of Falk Precision (40 employees); Charles Collins Jr. HR director of Travelers; Phil Jakes-Johnson of Solvents and Petroleum (30 employees); Janice Fenn, HR and Sonal Patel, nursing recruiter, at St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center; James Branche, HR at United Radio; Jonathan Cooper, HR director of Loretto.

Participants were invited to share up to six attributes of the ideal employee/what they are looking for in an employee. Results showed significant majority of attributes sought are soft skills.

Soft skills

Works well with others/teamwork/collaboration (9)

Dependable/reliable (7)

Open to change/flexible (7)

Open to coaching/teachable (6)

Self-motivated (4)

Personable/friendly (4)

Critical thinking/problem solving skills (4)

Communication skills/listening (3)

Accountable (3)

Goes above and beyond (3)

People skills (2)

Punctual (2)

Customer service skills (2)

Good work ethic (2)

Compassionate (2)

Positive attitude

Integrity

Conflict resolution skills

Professional

Balanced

Understands the culture of work

Looks "big picture"

Experience

Focused

Creative
Honesty
Dedicated
Work ethic
Consistent
Socially experienced
Available
Time management skills
Loyal
Good attitude
Knows why a business exists
Entrepreneurial
Fun
Confidence
Makes sincere effort
Leadership skills
Positive
Interest and experience in industry
Own a task
Work independently

Hard skills

Computer literacy (5)
Math skills (2)
Writing skills (2)
Ability to collect and analyze data
Mechanical knowledge
Technical proficiency
Research skills
Technical training
Core skills
STEM skills (through training or certification)

Question to panel: Which skills are hardest to find?

Bill Cullen: It's hard to find anyone with hard labor skills; for people under 35, soft skills are often missing. We need people with basic math and technical skills and the ability to learn as manufacturing and equipment updated.

“In our little shop, we have people who are very highly skilled and are the worst to deal with.”

We are seeking a balanced employee. Many young workers come with a sense of entitlement.

Charles Collins: Travelers: (recruits for entry-level jobs are in low- to mid-20s years of age.)
--Need basic math and mathematical reasoning.

--We can train people on skills; values like being on time have to be taught. More people are fired for attendance issues than for poor performance in training.

--The insurance concept is no different than it was 20 years ago. The methods and technology have changed. Younger workers have an advantage in being used to adapting quickly to new technology.

Jonathan Cooper, Loretto: No matter what the job is, people are not focused. They are not that interested in embracing what they need to do to be successful.

James Branche, United Radio: People on paper have the skills we need. But it's hard to get what's on paper in action. It's a challenge to keep people trained to stay up to date. The technology changes by the month.

Sonal Patel of St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center: We're looking for sustainability: how quickly can we develop training and new skills to keep workers up to date.

--She also cited a sense of entitlement among potential employees.

Question from facilitators: How do employers sort applicants to determine who might have the skills you need?

Phil Jakes-Johnson: Word of mouth. If the crew is happy ... the person will probably work out. If you reach out to good employees, they'll pre-screen applicants; personal recruitment is a motivator for success. "I never run ads. I don't need to."

Karen Armani: One way to get people with soft skills is by using such networks.

John Westin, Dannon Tool: Most hires come from referrals. Traditional ads are not as successful.

Janice Fenn from St. Joe's: Referrals from community organizations. Some entry-level applicants don't have necessary education or language skills. We work with NorthSide Up, send them to those programs and then try to bring them in. Colleges also a good source for recruiting.

Jonathan Cooper, Loretto: We do everything from food service, IT, patient aides. We try everything from referral bonuses, signing bonuses. We can never fill enough of the jobs, especially in direct care.

--Salary for those entry-level jobs: \$9-10/hour.

Janice at St. Joe's: Work with managers and develop a relationship so we know what they're looking for. Then they trust us to sort the applicants and send candidates to managers for interviews. It takes a lot of time to build that relationship.

Collins: Call center classes hire 15-20 people at a time. Process involves testing and interviewing, then acceptance into training program.

Question: What happens on the first day?

Phil Jakes-Johnson: I want to meet them and get them to see where they fit into the company and where the company fits with the customer.

--Pair new with a buddy.

--Reinforce the company culture: You can't swear; you can't pick on people; we aim for a G-rated work environment in an R-rated world.

Bill Cullen: First day is orientation, paperwork. Have used mentoring program in the past, but it is now more informal. A person with good skills still needs support.

--I've done most the jobs, from sweeping the floors on up.

--Check in at 30, 60 and 90 days.

--Evaluate after first week. I want compassion. (He hires at least half his workers from referrals.)

James Branche: I talk about the company, our core values. New employee has lunch with manager or team. Then is assigned a buddy.

Sonal Patel: We communicate with recruit ahead of time. Many people are hired before the job is open. The first day includes orientation and tours. Paired with someone and check in at three-, six- and 12-month points. New employees get full year of gearing up and contact.

Question: How do you deal with deficiencies?

John Westin: I put them in a job they can't fail at.

St. Joe's: There are leadership classes for all managers. Managers maintain relationship with recruiters.

Charles Collins: Travelers has a 12-week training program.

Phil Jakes-Johnson: I keep direct reports to seven so I can stay in touch.

Question: What is the role of unions on salary and relationships with employers?

Jonathan Cooper: Loretto has several bargaining agreements that make it difficult. But there is often room within agreement to address issues.

Try not to handle it at level of harshest violation and maybe it can be resolved via coaching. It is a delicate balance to abide by the contract.

Question: If you had no constraints, what would you improve in your internal system?

Laura Miller: Time is my biggest constraint. If I could figure it out, I'd have a better way of getting around to everybody.

Sonal Patel: More recognition for employees. Bonuses, gift certificates.

Several people noted that money is not always the solution; most employees want to feel valued.

Jakes-Johnson: The reason we keep a lot of workers is our salary and work atmosphere. Most drivers make \$55-62,000/year. The kitchen is always stocked; managers are like Mr. Rogers: We say “please” and “thank you.” You don’t want to take your workers for granted.

Question: Is lack of skills the main complaint of employers?

Jakes-Johnson: I just don’t see a skills gap. I think it’s a buzzword. Put people together and help them make something happen.

Randy Wolken of MACNY: The term “skills gap” means a lot of different things to different people. Re tech skills, some employers can’t find people no matter how many apply. I definitely see technical skills gaps. Young people are not encouraged to be computer controlled machine operators.

Bill Cullen: I would like to see some people encouraged to consider these jobs rather than college. He offered to provide tours to anyone interested in seeing his shop. He said people would likely be surprised at how clean and quiet it is. He said he often offers such tours and people rarely take him up on offer.

Wolken: It’s difficult to hire people at lower wage end.

Jonathan Cooper: Health care is a heavily regulated industry. Even in food service, which is 500 employees, requires fingerprinting.

It’s very difficult to find enough LPNs and RNs. We’re competitive re wages, but there’s a lot of competition for RNs (\$50-60,000/year).

John Westin: I came from a manufacturing family, but was pressured to go to college. Before choosing a major, high school students might want to find out what the career really is.

Bruce Hamm of MACNY: There’s a disconnect when the largest major at SU is political science. How many say they are going into manufacturing or health careers? Jobs have changed and kids have not kept up with those changes.

Mary Thompson, Homebuilders Association: Members struggle to get good workers and a lot of it is cultural. A lot of guidance counselors are not talking about the manufacturing and building industries.

Dominic Robinson of CenterState CEO/Northside UP: It’s not an either/or situation. Soft skills will serve you well across the continuum. Need to embed core competencies into real-world experiences. We need to help young people focus their interests into a real career. We need more use of internships and job shadowing. We need to help people reconcile the reality of the market and encourage experiential learning.

Heidi Holtz: I was a theater major and landed my first job because I knew how to be on time. We need open minds about job possibilities. Poli sci majors may make great manufacturers.

St. Joe's: Tours of hospital offer look at diversity of jobs.

Carole Hill of SUNY Educational Opportunity Center: There is a large population of adults who dropped out of high school or college. There is no such training for this group. The population I work with doesn't know anything about manufacturing.

Honora Spillane of Onondaga County Economic Development Agency: Some employers are waiting for things to come at them. There's some responsibility on employers to address this.

Melissa Menon of OnPoint for College: Informational interviews are win/win. Employer gets to tell about business; candidate gets practice.

Thursday Morning Roundtable, April 24 featured Jenn O'Connor, New York state director of Council for a Strong America, presenting "Ensuring the Central New York Region's Global Success: Reversing our 'skills gap' through high school education models." Report by ReadyNation/America's Edge is at <http://bit.ly/1j9u3PT>.

NYS Senator Dave Valesky and NYS Assemblyman Anthony Brindisi outlined proposed legislation for a CTE diploma. Here's info about the bill: <http://shar.es/T9TYf>

Syracuse City School District's Chief Academic Officer Laura Kelley discussed the school district's CTE plans.

TMR program will be podcast at <http://www.wcny.org/radio/shows/tmr/>

The schedule for upcoming meetings is as follows:

May 8, Study Committee meeting, 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. at ProLiteracy with unemployed/underemployed panel

May 20, Study Committee meeting, 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. at ProLiteracy, Panel of services and training providers: SUNY EOC, CNYWorks, JobsPlus, Green/Health Train, Center for Community Alternatives and Spanish Action League

June TBD Study Committee meetings.

Also relevant to study: Monday, May 19, 6 p.m. "Gaining Ground," Free community film screening and conversation at Tucker Missionary Baptist Church, 515 Oakwood Ave., Syracuse. Organized by ArtRage Gallery, the Urban Jobs Task Force and Tucker MBC. This event is part of the Gifford Foundation "What if..." film series.

Submitted by Renée K. Gadoua, study writer