

OCL Study Session, June 24, 11:30 at ProLiteracy.

Attendees: Kim Armani, Laurie Black, Kathy Byrnes, Ginny Carmody, Jessica Cohen, Jeff Craig, David Goodness, Bruce Hamm, Carol Hill, Heidi Holtz, Phil Jakes-Johnson, Peter Knoblock, Sarah McIlvain, Don MacLaughlin, Rhonda O'Connor, Frank Ridzi, Mike Sattler, Honora Spillane, Jai Subedi, Mary Thompson

OCL: Co-chair Barbara Carranti, Sandra Barrett, Renée K. Gadoua

Attendees broke into six groups to discuss each of the six gaps identified thus far. Comments generated in the discussions will help focus additional research and structure of report.

Gaps Identified During Study Sessions

1. Access to employment for longtime unemployed or underemployed.

A variety of barriers affect many, including low-literacy, generational poverty, people returning from corrections system, people with substance abuse, mentally ill, developmentally disabled and refugees. Barriers include racial or age stereotypes, limited literacy, digital divide, soft skills, and cultural knowledge.

Group responses:

- Must acknowledge link between this issue and findings in OCL refugee and early childhood education reports. The high dropout rate has roots in problems with early childhood education.
- Address how unemployment rate of recent refugees compares with the longer unemployed refugees.
- Re people returning from prison: Anecdotes that the DMV is blocking ID cards to people. This is a simple but strong barrier to reintegrating.
- Is Centro part of the solution? Basic access to jobs comes through public transportation.
- Focus on lack of soft skills may deprive CNY of workforce that brings different strengths.
- Little attention has been given to problems of people with mental illness, addictions or learning disabilities. What exists in community and how can we shore them up?

2. Gaps for highly-skilled workers laid off and hoping to stay in the region.

Challenges include: outdated technology, resume, networking and job search protocols; CNY Works and DOL confusing and inaccessible.

Group responses:

- How do we retain the highly skilled workers – including people with PhDs and master’s and 20-plus years of experience?
- Start with the talent pool: what can we do (use the [bricolage](#) entrepreneurial approach): Innovate with what you have at hand instead of fitting round pegs into existing square holes. Use your competitive advantage. Find the opportunities and the people who can fill those needs.
- Engage people with specific skills sets and motivate them.
- Need to improve ways of connecting job seekers to stated needs, such as outlined in CenterState and DOL reports.
- The sandbox/Tech Garden/startup initiatives seem to skew toward attracting young/recent college graduates. How can more seasoned workers be targeted?
- Who responds/should respond when big layoffs occur? City? County? CenterState?
- Address the instability of large nonprofit sector in region. (Many people laid off from private sector jobs turn to non-profits later.) How can community address low wages and lack of retirement plans for this large sector to entice people to do this important work?
- Shift philosophy to redefine how skills can be used rather than being stuck in job title or degree.
- CenterState’s regional focus could be a model for job seekers to think beyond 20-minute commute to work. Think regionally about possible jobs.
- Entrepreneurial suggestion: Create an app that displays jobs by location – company, address and job opening.
- Encourage employers to buy into same format to list job openings,
- Estimated that current community capacity only 10% of need for low-literacy adults. Better literacy skills would boost the job pool.

3. **Reported 1,500-1,800 unfilled jobs in region, but many unemployed.**

- Mismatch between employer’s expectations and what employee expects to do; fair wages; disconnect between businesses stated needs and skills of job seekers.
- Group responses:
- Where do you go for jobs? A one-stop shop is needed.
- Website issue: to help job seekers, encourage less of a one-size-fits-all online application form. (This is a burden for refugees, for example, since question about college could block them progressing in application process. How could we create a reliable and easy common website?
- Employers, especially small businesses, rely on word of mouth because of speed and ability to attract better workers. How can we encourage employers to find time and money to do it right?
- Employers should be willing to train on job.
- Streamlined way of finding jobs by better links (real and virtual) between boards by industry. Trades are paying well. Best for non-union, non-apprentices.

- Job fairs work for larger companies. All employers could start thinking outside the box for hiring, use skills differently. Refugees and engineers, for example, may not have proper credentials, but bring experience and skills. How do we address complicated codes issues?
- Transportation a barrier for some. (Visions for Change addresses this; maybe we need a larger program or company to address need. Soft skills side – importance of getting to work and on time – needs to be addressed in some populations.) Assess what’s available here, publicize better, and suggest expansion.
- Create a business for transport, community-wide transportation system. Like "I'm Smart," would drive people. Liability issues are paramount. Cab companies? Worth looking to see if other communities do this? Jobs cab or jobs bus?
- Are website job searches best model for refugee community? What’s a better way for employers to connect with this employer pool?
- How many job fairs are there? How do you find out about them? Getting the word out, having these threaded together, especially for small businesses. Hold the job fairs where the people are.
- Must address fair wages. Doing the math: How do wages affect economic development in our region?
- How is community helping people get jobs when an unsatisfactory job may push them off public assistance? Are we disincentivizing? The math just doesn't add up.

4. **Gaps in career path/progression/training/credentials.**

- Challenges include limited apprenticeships; training programs that do not lead to job; barriers to union/apprentice programs because of race, literacy, politics; credentials from other countries do not easily transfer here.
- Group responses:
- Sources for training include OCM/BOCES, school districts, SUNY EOC, Literacy Volunteers, libraries, OJT training through CNY Works
- Businesses have different ideas about skills gap. Need clarity about which gap employers are talking about.
- Need better alignment between high school and college success.
- Match supply and demand for employers and recognize this changes.
- Must bring all adults up to at least high school education.
- Help families motivate people to stay in school.
- As high schoolers are more involved in activities, not reading as much and skills declining.
- Where are the low-skilled jobs?
- It’s an employers’ market. They will hire most qualified, so it’s competitive.

5. **Gap between perceptions of skills gap from large companies vs. small companies.**

Small business owners don't see it as a big problem, if it exists at all. Needs are different, as are hiring practices.

Group responses:

- There is definitely a gap, but is it finding people or is it skills?
- Not just job seekers, but companies are restricted by culture, especially in large corporations.
- Companies may not see people's potential, or bureaucratic barriers prevent quick hiring. Those delays may not be realistic; people can't wait that long.
- Online applications are inaccessible and rigid. No leeway for discretion.
- Small companies tend to hire via word of mouth; large companies use mass job postings.
- Workforces aren't interchangeable.
- There's a difference between skills and credentials. (example: LPN)
- Does management value softer skills? What does that mean? Money/training should support developing skills.
- Need to distinguish between soft skills and aptitude of applicant.
- How much of the perceived gap is attributable to outside factors and how much is large company culture and/or wages?
- What is a company's responsibility to train? Is it even realistic to find the perfectly trained person?
- Small vs. large might not be the best description; better would be to address workplace culture and procedures
- Is there an expectation gap? What does employer expect and what is he willing to put into training and acclimation to culture?
- Company culture/structure more important than size in explaining different approaches and perceptions.
- Some of skills gap rests on management. They must learn appropriate job search skills to reach workforce desired.
- Align training with needs.

6. Soft skills a gap for many groups.

Includes business etiquette, cultural differences, poverty, changes in expectations for networking and job searching. Also includes skills such as teamwork, being on time, adapting to work culture, conflict resolution, communication skills.

Group responses:

Define soft skills via SCANS report.

- It's one of the biggest gaps. Challenge of addressing cultural divide/hidden rules of middle class society. Requires more than a workshop, but long-term mentoring.
- Work with employers to better understand generational poverty and cultural differences as well as generational differences with millennial.
- Re high school level standards for soft skills. What happens when the home environment does not reinforce these values?
- Use BOCES as a high school model.
- Learning standards for career development and occupational studies. Find and use common rubrics.
- Need to be early focus on this – not just starting in high school. Make it a thread throughout the curriculum.
- Stress value of internships (Bryant & Stratton requires them) and work experience.
- What happens to the forgotten middle, with 20% college-educated and 20 percent least educated? How to reach that group?
- What is the role for businesses in teaching soft skills? Can a guiding coalition provide best practices/training?
- Employers must set clear expectations. (Visions for Change offers model.)
- Move beyond attendance/timeliness to helping people understand how to communicate. Stress writing skills, mock interviews, dealing with change and challenges.
- Look to Albany's Tech Valley High School for alternative model.
- BOCES innovative tech program good model using project-based learning.
- Stress work readiness in college. Professional development and other work skills not valued enough.

Submitted by Renée K. Gadoua, study writer