Leveraging Kentucky Wired For Economic Development

On June 17 2016, the Fiber Optic Association (FOA), in partnership with Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), hosted a meeting to discuss the critical need for workforce development to support the construction of the KentuckyWired broadband project. Our goal for the meeting was to share information and to ensure that there are shared goals with all the key players in workforce development for KentuckyWired. We also wanted those involved to be aware of how everyone's cooperation is needed to ensure the success of the project.

KentuckyWired is the statewide fiber optic network that will carry high-speed broadband into specified locations in all 120 counties in order to serve government locations. KentuckyWired will be unique in allowing "open access" to the network, so local private or public service providers can tap into this new broadband network at much lower costs than previously possible. Local providers can connect their equipment to KentuckyWired to expand and extend their local services to individual homes and businesses, growing their customer base to the "last mile."

These were the objectives for the meeting:
- Look at how communications is important to economic development and what's happening in other parts of the country
- Review the KY Wired project
- Introduce all parties here involved to each other
- Discuss the roles and goals of the various parties
- Discuss the importance of the workforce to the success of KY Wired and how we can (and are) all work together to ensure that a properly trained workforce is available

Attendees were administrators from KCTCS colleges who are teaching fiber optics, contractors and subcontractors who are involved in the construction of the state-wide network and key govt. officials.   KCTCS administrators were asked to invite local companies that they are already working with or want to start a program with. The idea was to provide a forum for the KY Wired contractors to share their concerns about developing the workforce they need and how the schools can help fill the pipeline with qualified graduates of the KCTCS system.

Here are the speakers and an overview of the topics that were discussed:

Chris Moore, Executive Director of Kentucky Wired

Overview

"Training and Certification are important'

"Connected Nation Exchange" helps with community planning (http://cnx.io)

 The cable plant will be 85% on poles, 15% underground.

McQuay/financial
Fujutsu equipment

Bowlin

~100 crews, >600 workers – 60% local labor

Middle mile only "all about right of way"

Jim Hayes, President of the Fiber Optic Assn (FOA)

How communications, commerce and society depend on fiber optics for economic development
(Jim's full presentation is available for download at http://www.foa.org/KY/)

Donna Davis, Chancellor's Office of Workforce Solutions, KCTCS

Donna gave an overview of the KCTCS system and what they are trying to accomplish for workforce readiness statewide –

KCTCS is Kentucky's primary provider of workforce education, delivering programs and services that address the full spectrum of needs faced by business and industry, as well as, programs for individuals who want to upgrade their skills.   The system has 16 colleges and 70 locations throughout KY.

Fiber optics is an important program offering for KCTCS concentrating on 8 campuses for full fiber programs based on FOA curriculum and offering FOA certification. Programs are diverse including a lineman program and a Broadband major, Also FOA curriculum on fiber feeds into other majors – eg: telecom, IT

There are a number of programs that address workforce needs including "Work Ready Communities". The program measures such factors as community-wide digital literacy, student ACT scores, academic degrees attained, GED programs, current broadband capacity or setting a timetable for broadband readiness

Tom Collins - FOA Master Instructor

Requirements for training the workforce to build today's communications systems.

Tom's presentation touched on the effects of the changing workplace on job seekers as employers continue to raise the hiring standards of basic, technical, and academic preparation for new applicants and are increasingly focused on demonstrated competencies and the ability to adapt to the constant change in this evolving workplace. For instance FOA KSA's (knowledge, skills and abilities) can be used to distinguish the "qualified candidates" from the "unqualified candidates" for a position.

Industry recognition of formal certification programs such as the FOA's CFOT$^{®}$ offer both the employer and the job seekers a measure of worker competence, whether the

worker is new to the industry or an existing employee looking to move up. He also advocated for a goal of combining industry recognized certification plus college credit

(Tom's full presentation is available for download at http://www.foa.org/KY/)

Panel Discussion – Public/private partnerships moderated by Jim Hayes – How do KY Wired contractors see their role in the development of communications in KY? What are the critical needs?

Panelists:
Sean Flora – Cincinnati Bell
Loyal Lovelady – Ledcor
Eddie Manning -The Bowlin Group
Dave Harpham - Team Fishel

Goal –"An adaptable and scale-able workforce

Tech is changing rapidly

Employees must be available 24/7

Soft skills vs Hard skills
The connection between hard skills and soft skills was discussed.

Colleges teach hard skills in their specialized technical classes. For instance, in the KCTCS fiber optic program, they are using FOA curriculum and will receive FOA certifications. The expectation is that the student will be trained in the relevant KSA's (knowledge, skills, abilities). They are expected to have the background to receive "on the job training" (OJT) when hired.

Certification
All the panelists thought that certification is an important measure of both hard and soft skills.
Ledcore thinks training and certification is so important that they would like to see certification credential information on the company ID card.

The panelists agreed that the majority of training for new hires is OJT - 6/8 weeks to 3 months learning how the company works. Comment: "Employees are expected to hit the ground running"

All the panelists agreed that Soft skills are given same weight at hard skills.

Hard skills show that you are trainable - Soft skills help you through the "spikes" in workload. Colleges can teach both.

Can colleges do an initial assessment of soft skills and teach?

This training needs to be pushed down to the HS level as well.

These are behavior "competencies" that fall under the soft skills category:

- Adaptability

- Having good communications skills as a team player and when interacting with customers on the job site

- Being a team player

- Mobility

- Reliability – show up to work on-time

- Integrity

- Having good judgment – this important when safety is critical

- Attitude – Learn the company way first – don't assume you know everything on the day you start a new job

- Students also need practical "life skills" training: a course on using a mobile tablet, Microsoft works, especially Excel, PPT – comments: "Excell rules our world" "Databases are huge"

Fishel uses a "Validated Assessment system" to assist in predicting which employees will be successful, to determine if the way you are hiring individuals into your organization works or not." It took several years to develop this program which reflects the needs of Team Fishel very specifically.

Advice to students for their job search:
- Expect to apply for a position online but panelists indicated that this does not replace "face to face" interview after initial screenings.

- Look for long-term career vs a retail job

- Companies put their job descriptions online – good to review before a job interview

- Learn to manage their social media profiles – don't put anything on your Facebook page you would not want your employer to see.

Can schools show students how to use linked-in to help in job searches?

Work study ideas:
Internships – all the panelists are supportive of this important bridge for a student to begin to experience the workplace They also represent an opportunity to speak directly

to people who have experience in the fiber optic field. Their knowledge of the job and working environment will give students a greater understanding of what it's all about and what you need to do to progress.

Donna mentioned that KCTCS has grants for internships.

"Job shadowing" is another program that provides an opportunity for students to interview a designated "mentor" from the company and observe what a job entails. This could be a one day experience or an ongoing relationship with a student and the mentor.

Both colleges and companies have "pipeline" problems

Colleges hear from students: "I cannot quit my job at Walmart to take courses"

Companies have a pipeline problem because of turnover. Comment: "Hire for skill – fire for fit"

Turnover is greatest in the 0 – 24 months time period. Companies see an employee who has worked successfully for them for 3 years as an "asset" to invest in.

New hires who start an initial orientation have a 70% drop rate – drugs are a big cause. Some just won't show up on time.

(A problem with older workers is they can't/won't use a computer)

Dave Harpham from Fishel talked about The 3rd industrial revolution – current workers are "aging out" – replacement workers are not in the pipeline. There is a 15-20 year gap between experienced workers and new workers now being hired.

Sean from Cincinnati Bell : "The average splicer has been with the company 23 years."

"Succession planning is the #1 concern for companies to replace the current workers

Recruitment:
Fishel does outreach into community – Urban League, community centers

Multiple "touch points" 10th, 11th, 12th grade

Reaching out to guidance counselors

Schools/companies must work together to fill the pipeline – have a "deeper engagement". This meeting was just the beginning of an ongoing commitment by KCTCS to be responsive to the needs of local KY companies.

Notes prepared by Karen Hayes, FOA, June 24, 2016