



Employers: Skilled workforce needed

'Soft' skills in demand

Posted: November 28, 2013 6:00 a.m.

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Link to online version of article: <http://coastalcourier.com/section/12/article/62070/>

Offering employers a skilled workforce is an important aspect of economic development, according to local leaders. A community's supply of skilled workers can help attract manufacturers and other businesses, thus creating jobs for local residents and making the give-and-take a win-win for everyone.

Unfortunately, 70 percent of manufacturers indicated on a national survey that they have moderate to severe difficulties recruiting skilled labor, according to Liberty County Development Authority CEO Ron Tolley. This issue, which is not unique to Liberty County, does not deter businesses from locating here, Tolley said.

"If these were insurmountable issues, they (local manufacturers) would not be expanding here," he said.

When Firth Rixson went into production 18-24 months ago in Liberty County, company officials said they would grow from 75-100 employees to 204 employees, according to Tolley. After beginning operations here, the company expanded its facility by 20 percent and expects to enlarge its workforce by 50 percent, going up to 304 employees, he said.

"Hugo Boss started with 50 workers and they said they would grow to 125," Tolley continued. After about eight years, the company went from 125 workers to 200, he said.

SNF Chemtall, which has a plant in Riceboro, is another major employer in Liberty County, Tolley said. The manufacturer produces water-soluble polymers for use in municipal waste, industrial waste, wastewater treatment, mining and oil-field applications. SNF Chemtall employs 4,000 workers worldwide and 1,420 in North America, according to snfinc.com.

David Kaye, SNF vice president of manufacturing, said the company spends a lot of time and money interviewing and screening prospective job candidates.

"A relatively high proportion (of applicants) fail to make it through the probationary period and through the first year of employment," Kaye said.

Kaye said SNF had 1,450 applicants in 2013. Of those, 455 were screened over the telephone and 300 were interviewed. Of the 300 interviewed, 136 were hired this year, he said. Seventeen of those failed within 90 days and 26 failed within the first year. The vice president said 14 hires who failed to stay with the company resigned; two were released due to the company's drug, alcohol

and weapons policy; seven were terminated due to (poor) job performance; two for falsification of information; and one for attendance issues.

P.J. Schneider, Georgia Department of Labor regional coordinator, said most employers are looking for job applicants that possess "the right work ethics" or what some employment professionals call soft skills.



Photo by Denise Etheridge

Liberty College and Career Academy/Savannah Technical College dual-enrolled manufacturing students Austin Eisner, Wayne Myrie and Malik Williams look at an array of fasteners. The Liberty County Development Authority works with Savannah Tech and the LCCA to help prepare a new generation of skilled labor.

"Displaying the proper soft skills means individuals must show up for work daily, on time, ready for work," Schneider said. "They are able to work as a member of a team or work alone with little or no supervision. They respect others and are disciplined. They are able to communicate effectively and possess other good work habits."

Schneider said prospective employees also should be "trainable."

Many young employees lack the soft skills older workers possess, Tolley said. Many of these "baby boomers" are now retiring, which is one reason manufacturing employers are having trouble filling skilled trade positions, he said. Employers say they don't have enough skilled workers to replace those who are leaving, according to the LCDA CEO.

This issue is not unique to Liberty County, Tolley said.

"But we are aware of that and actions are being taken to address the issue," he said.

Tolley said the LCDA supported the Liberty County School System's efforts to establish the Liberty College and Career Academy and Savannah Technical College's decision to build a permanent campus here. The development authority works closely with both Savannah Tech and the LCCA in networking with manufacturers to help prepare a new generation of skilled labor, he said.

"We can catch people that are still in the school system," Tolley said.

"As chairman of the board for Savannah Technical College, I can say that having Savannah Tech as a partner in workforce development has been a great enhancement to our labor force," Liberty County Commission Chairman Donald Lovette said. "Through Savannah Tech, we are offering CDL classes for local citizens to achieve their CDL licenses. In addition, we opened a fully operational state-of-the-art cosmetology lab at the Liberty County campus of Savannah Tech. Both the CDL and cosmetology classes allow our students the opportunity to complete these programs at home. Before this, there had been student issues with transportation that were a big obstacle to the completion of the lab portions of their study.

"The newly created industry roundtable is a great beginning to developing a dialogue with our industrial partners," Lovette added.

Tolley said the LCDA helps facilitate these roundtable meetings between Savannah Tech, the LCCA and area employers.

"I am also excited that our industrial partners are serving as advisors to the Liberty College and Career Academy," Lovette said. "If we can provide the right classes and develop the kind of employee they are looking for, then it is a win-win for everyone. The academy teaches the hard and the soft skills."

"What I hear over and over is the need for soft skills or workplace ethics," LCCA CEO Tom Alexander said. "So many employers locally have expressed concerns that there are lots of talented, trainable folks in our area they would love to hire, but they don't have the workplace ethics skills needed to be viable. These concerns are the primary reason we teach workplace ethics as a required part of participation in our programs. Students are rated using the Department of Labor's GeorgiaBEST system, and we also teach the traits from the system in 'stand-alone' seminars each semester."

Liberty County Chamber of Commerce CEO Leah Poole agreed with the academy head, saying employers tell her they have trouble finding employees who exhibit such soft skills as reliability, promptness and courtesy.

"This is why, for 2014, our board decided to support the GeorgiaBEST program in our schools," Poole said.

The chamber previously "led the charge" for the certified Work Ready program two years ago, the chamber CEO said.

"This program is still being used by several local employers, one being SNF Chemtall, who is a chamber member," Poole said.

Schneider said several employers still require or prefer job-seekers to possess a Georgia Work Ready certification. STC offers Georgia Work Ready testing for a fee, he said.

Along with networking with local employers, the LCCA took an opportunity to connect with regional employers Nov. 15. The academy hosted the second day of Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle's annual business and education summit. Cagle attended the first day of the summit at Effingham County's college and career academy.

The event brought business and education leaders together to network and collaborate on creating a well-trained workforce that will meet the needs of Georgia's companies.

Liberty County Schools Superintendent Dr. Valya Lee participated in the summit's panel discussion.

"The summit (was) a face-to-face meeting to give Liberty County administrators further insight into technical and soft skills that businesses look for in students when considering them for employment," Lee said.

The county's high-school students aren't the only prospective employees ready to fill jobs in Liberty County. With Fort Stewart as a major employer, separating service members and retirees are looking for second careers in the civilian sector.

"It is common knowledge that skilled workers, especially those with technical skills, are in short supply in the U.S.," said Jake Hutchings, director of CivilianJobs.com, a company that helps military members connect with civilian careers through job fairs, a job board and staffing services. "So anyone exiting the military with technical skills, an honorable

discharge and a confident, positive approach to their work will be highly likely to find work in any number of industries. And it may not be in exactly the field they are trained in. An avionics technician might be a great fit for a company that services medical equipment, for instance, because they've proven they can be successfully trained in a technical field. The company will re-train them for their specific technologies."

Other than technical skills, intangibles such as leadership and dedication always are in demand, according to Hutchings.

"Frequently, veterans overlook their leadership attributes because 'it was just part of the job,'" he said. "If on their resume and in the interview, they can communicate that 'I led a team of this many people,' or 'I was in charge of so much cost of equipment,' or 'I improved an operational process from here to here by implementing this new procedure,' those are universal skills to which any civilian company can relate."

Schneider reminds employers they can apply for the work-opportunity tax credit through the Georgia DOL for hiring veterans.

"Employers can receive \$2,400-\$4,600 (federal tax incentive) for hiring a veteran," he said.