

Cleveland Foundation pushes placing workers in "family-sustaining" jobs by closing skills gap



A study commissioned by the Cleveland Foundation says that not enough Northeast Ohio residents are prepared to compete for openings in in-demand fields. Foundation officials are spearheading an effort to close the skills gap. (*Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer*)

By Olivera Perkins, The Plain Dealer
September 11, 2014

CLEVELAND, Ohio - A skills gap exists locally, a new **Cleveland Foundation** report shows, and the foundation is launching a collaborative effort aimed at closing it.

The report done for the foundation by **FutureWorks**, a New York-based consulting and policy development firm, says that jobseekers increasingly will

need training or education beyond a high school diploma in order to escape the trap of low-wage jobs. Such requirements include post-secondary credentials, such as those offered in advanced manufacturing, as well as associate's, undergraduate and advanced degrees. By 2020, 64 percent of jobs in Ohio will require post-secondary training, the report says, however:

- Only 43 percent of Cleveland residents currently have some post-secondary education
- Only 58 percent of Cuyahoga residents have one.
- Only 54 percent of Ohio residents have such education.

Helen Williams, the foundation's program director for education, said an essential benefit of the report is that it captures the skills gap in Northeast Ohio at a "granular" level.

"It was eye-opening," she said of the report's findings.

Among the items of interest to her is the examination of the alignment -- or more accurately misalignment -- of in-demand jobs with the available supply of workers to fill them.

For example, in 2013 there were 11,204 openings for computer and information technology workers in Greater Cleveland. However, only 1,301 people here had received credentials in that field in 2012. (The report doesn't offer figures about how many openings went unfilled.) Another example from the report includes the difficulty in filling installation, maintenance and repair positions. Openings numbered 2,350, though only 593 people locally had been awarded credentials in that area the year before. A third example focused on job postings for engineers. In 2013, there were 3,048 openings for engineers, but only 1,259 students here had received degrees in the field the year before.

Though the report includes information about the labor market in Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina and Summit counties, the foundation is going to focus its initial efforts on the City of Cleveland.

"A strong region needs a strong city," Williams said.

Shilpa Kedar, the foundation's program director of economic development, agreed. She said the report shows that the mismatch between the skills employers want with those jobseekers have was greatest in the urban core. She said it was important that this segment of the population not be "left behind" in having the opportunity to upskill to compete for good-paying jobs.

"We want to create a pathway leading to prosperity," she said.

The goal is to convene a panel by October with the mission of developing strategies aimed at increasing the supply of workers with the required skills to meet the demand for jobs with "family-sustaining" wages. In Cuyahoga, a livable hourly wage is \$17.61, the report says.

The panel will focus on jobs in "Five Economic Clusters of Opportunity": biosciences and health care, advanced manufacturing, energy production, information technology and financial and business services/back office. The goal is to target one of these sectors, then "deeply" engage employers, the Cleveland Municipal School District and higher education institutions in designing and creating an "Exemplar Career Pathway." The target date for the career pathway's launch is 2015. The initiative comes just as the CMSD is embarking on revising its technical and career education programs.

In addition to creating the career pathway, the committee will have other focus areas, including encouraging students to explore such in-demand fields long before they prepare to graduate high school. In fulfilling its mission, the committee must be able to find answers to a broad-ranging set of questions, Kedar and Williams said. Questions, including this one, an employer may ask: "What role do I play in creating more qualified workers?" Or one like this from a middle school student: "What should I be studying to prepare for a good job in the future?"

Kedar looks to the Netherlands and Finland for inspiration for what can happen in Cleveland. There, businesses and school districts work closely together, in a continuing effort, strengthening workforce education, she said. A skills gap is less likely because worker preparation is often in alignment with employer needs.

"It blew us away," Kedar said of technical and education in those countries.

The report's authors gave a presentation on its findings Wednesday at the foundation's downtown office. John Hoops and Stephen Michon, both vice presidents at FutureWorks, spoke of the disconnect between worker preparation and employer needs.

Michon said the majority of jobs in 1973 required a high school diploma or less. By 2020, the reverse will be true.

"Increasingly, in the economy, there is a demand for skilled and credentialed workers," he said. "In 1973, 28 percent of jobs required some college or better. By 2020, 65 percent will."

Hoops said even though getting a post-secondary education often offers a pathway to a "family-sustaining" wage, higher education institutions in Northeast Ohio could do a better job of making sure this happens. For example, more than 50,000 students are enrolled in programs offering associate's degrees or certificates at public community colleges, but only about 10 percent graduate. Additionally, few are enrolled in in-demand fields.

More than 80,000 students are enrolled in area institutions granting undergraduate and graduate degrees, the report says. However, small numbers of undergraduate and graduate degrees are awarded in technical fields, such as information technology and engineering, in comparison to those in health, business education and liberal arts.

These, and other of the report's findings, may cause some to conclude that bridging the skills gap locally is nearly unachievable. Hoops invites naysayers to think otherwise. He said there is a steady supply of in-demand jobs in Northeast Ohio. There is also a desire among the foundation and other stakeholders in helping create an adequate supply of workers to fill these openings.

"There is a lot of opportunity in Cleveland," he said.