

Trade And Transportation

Old School Workplace Skills More Critical Than Ever In High-Tech Transportation And Trade Fields

■ By JAN VOGEL and TYLER REEB

More than 13,000 leaders in transportation from around the world gathered in Washington, D.C., earlier this month for the Transportation Research Board's (TRB) 94th annual meeting. Described by one Politico.com writer as the "Super Bowl of the transportation world," the event gives leaders from industry, government and academia access to innovative research and best practices in all modes of transportation. Commonly mentioned buzz words at the weeklong event were autonomous vehicles, Big Data, Intelligent Transportation Systems, disruptive technology and other emerging trends that are reshaping how people and goods will be transported in the future.

However, with so much focus on the "Brave New World" of transportation and trade, it is easy to lose sight of the less glitzy but equally important workplace skills – such as oral and written communication skills, project management, critical thinking, conflict resolution, and the ability to work in culturally diverse environments – that ensure that any organization runs smoothly. Herein lies the value of Workforce Development Boards

(WDBs) in helping employers in trade and transportation circles develop not only next-generation technological aptitudes but also the "old school" skills required to get the job done in any business environment.

WDBs, and the one-stop centers that they operate, play a significant role in identifying the workforce needs of industry and preparing a pipeline of skilled workers to meet those needs. Across the state, these boards support industry sectors that drive regional economic growth including advanced manufacturing, health care, construction, transportation and utilities. They identify skills gaps and labor force needs of employers and coordinate with secondary and post-secondary schools to develop viable training solutions. There are 48 boards across the state, seven of which are operated in Los Angeles County. Locally, the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network supports communities in Long Beach and Signal Hill.

Employers in every industry sector continue to identify basic skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal interactions and teamwork as critical to workforce success. Fortune Magazine recently reported that, when administering a basic skills assessment, researchers at Princeton-based Educational Testing Service (ETS) were surprised to discover that "millennials in the U.S. fall short when it comes to the skills employers want most: literacy (including the ability to follow simple instructions), practical math, and – hold on to your hat – a category called "problem solving in technology-rich environments." Even the best-educated millennials state-side couldn't compete with their counterparts in Japan, Finland, South Korea, Belgium, Sweden or elsewhere. The job skills of adults ages 16 to 65, in 23 countries, were measured including literacy (the ability to understand and use written text); numeracy (basic math skills) and problem solving (using digital technology). U.S. millennials rank last or near the bottom in every category.

Workforce boards are working with employers to ad-

dress basic skills deficiencies among new and incumbent workers. They are working with high schools and colleges to design new training methods so that students and workers develop both academic and technical knowledge along with workplace know-how. The South Bay Workforce Investment Board has developed the Blueprint for Workplace Success curriculum, an interactive, web-based training program designed to build the basic skills and competencies that cross industries and job categories and that are foundational to workplace success: 1. foundational skills for a winning attitude, flexibility and workplace savvy; 2. communication skills for active listening, effective speech and effective writing; 3. time management and skills to organize efficiently; 4. teamwork and leadership – critical thinking and problem solving; and 5. how to manage and resolve conflict – working in a culturally diverse environment.

Sustaining a skilled workforce is critical to our country's economic growth. According to the California Workforce Development Board, "Workers must be learners who can traverse a labor market landscape that is less about "jobs" and more about a set of marketable skills." Central to this objective is the leadership that WDBs play in facilitating collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders including business, labor, education, social services, philanthropic organizations and community-based agencies. It will require that stakeholders work together to identify the workforce needs of businesses in local priority sectors, and develop education and training approaches that bridge the gap between skills currently available in the workforce and the needs of growing and emerging sectors of the local economy.

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