

Creating a Career-Ready Culture in Indiana



By Teresa Lubbers

“We just can’t find enough employees and those we can find often don’t have the right skills.” That’s the all-too-common refrain by Indiana employers, across all job sectors, who confront a talent pipeline that often fails to deliver the human capital they need to grow and thrive.

The skills gap is nothing new, of course, but it’s never been more detrimental to employers or our state’s economy than it is today. Investments in employee development have always been part of the cost of doing business, but the expectation is greater in an era when highly specialized technical skills and essential “soft skills” have become the norm.

Employers today can neither fully rely on the traditional education system to prepare prospective employees, nor can they afford to bear the burden of completely retraining these individuals themselves. Fortunately, educators at all levels are working to adapt their instruction to a new expectation that emphasizes career – as well as college – readiness for all students. And more employers are stepping off the sidelines to play a more proactive role in creating their future employees.

Opportunities available

Internship programs at the college level are nothing new either, but higher education leaders now recognize that these workplace experiences are critical to their graduates’ career success. Unfortunately, these experiences are often the exception rather than the rule. According to the first Gallup-Purdue Index Report released last year, only 6% of college graduates strongly agree that they had a meaningful internship or job in college.

Educators are responding with a new career-minded focus and innovative instructional approaches that blur the lines between education and employment. A small but growing number of Hoosier high school and college students are receiving postsecondary education and workforce training at the same time, and an increasing number of Indiana employers are partnering with educators to shape curricula by integrating with relevant work-based applications into students’ classroom learning.

At the same time, it’s becoming clear that these experiences must occur earlier in a student’s education and more businesses of all sizes must connect with students long before they arrive with job applications and resumes in hand. Noblesville-based Helmer Scientific is one such example. In partnership with Noblesville High School, Helmer Scientific is exposing students to a wider range of potential career fields, introducing students to productive workplace habits and values, and helping students make connections between their academic learning and its real-world applications.

Success in Noblesville

This mutually beneficial relationship between educators, employers and students is already paying dividends to all involved. The result is probably best illustrated in the words of Sam Sigman, a senior at

Noblesville High School who recently interned with Helmer Scientific and Kenny Wilson, Sam’s supervisor at the company. (See full story about this successful internship program on Page 13).

When asked what he learned about the work environment that he didn’t know going into the experience, Sam’s response was telling. “Well, one of the biggest things – and it may sound odd – I learned what an actual job is. Kenny is an engineer but what does that mean, what does he do, and it’s a lot more than just designing and building. There are reports you have to do, paperwork and logistics and lots of data you have to analyze. I had to communicate a lot with people and that can be intimidating. I came in after hours. I had timelines, I had deadlines that had to get done, so I learned there are responsibilities that you may not know of when you sign up for a job, but they’re there.”

Wilson notes that having high school-age students at work had a greater impact on the company’s culture than expected, not only for the young interns but also for current employees. “I think it motivates everybody throughout the company and encourages them to consider if they should go back to school seeing how smart the young people coming into the building are. These kids are graduating high school with associate degrees. That did not exist 10 years ago, so that’s very motivating to me.”

Principal Jeff Bryant stressed that Noblesville High School didn’t start out to create an internship program but rather with the goal of reimagining the high school experience for the 21st century with opportunities for students to transfer and apply their learning in different settings. Bryant also noted that schools do not often reach outside their walls for assistance in helping to prepare students, so creating community partnerships was the first step.

With that goal in mind, Indiana is launching the first-ever “Career Ready” campaign this April through July as part of a concerted effort to better educate Hoosiers about the wide range of possible career paths and expose students of all ages to meaningful workplace experiences – from job-shadowing to internships. Every Indiana K-12 school received promotional materials to host a Career Ready kickoff week (suggested dates April 20-24). This is a great time for schools to teach students about career-related vocabulary, education requirements, growing job sectors, employability skills and more while partnering with local businesses to provide speakers, field trips and other workplace experiences.

We must do more to harness the power of educators and employers working together to prepare students to lead meaningful and productive lives.



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