

Boosting Laborforce Competitiveness in Wayne County, North Carolina

By Lawrence Bivins

THE WAYNE OCCUPATIONAL READINESS KEYS FOR SUCCESS INITIATIVE

In the span of only three years, a powerful partnership is yielding measurable progress in elevating the competitive posture of Wayne County, North Carolina – showcasing the value of determination, collaboration, and the right tools in tackling workforce readiness challenges. The Wayne Occupational Readiness Keys for Success (“WORKS”) harnesses an increasingly popular set of skills assessment and enhancement tools developed by ACT, Inc., the Iowa-based standardized testing organization, to minimize the risks employers face in hiring, while giving both newly minted and more seasoned participants in the workforce a widely recognized, portable credential that can lead to job-placement success and higher wages.

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COMPETITIVENESS IN WAYNE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

By Lawrence Bivins

In good economic times or bad, laborforce quality is one of a small handful of factors distinguishing successful communities and regions from those falling behind. The issue is especially challenging for economic developers, who, while having no formal role as educators, are nonetheless accountable to businesses when workforce deficits impede progress toward productivity and profit goals. In most cases, local development professionals play the role of advocates and facilitators – using their leadership positions to forge partnerships that embrace challenges and opportunities surrounding the quality of labor assets.

In the past three years, few have done this more effectively than the Wayne County Development Alliance (WCDA), a public/private partnership charged with leading job creation, industry recruitment, and business retention strategies for Wayne County, NC. WCDA's central role in the Wayne Occupational Readiness Keys for Success ("WORKS") initiative made it the 2009 winner of IEDC's Excellence in Economic Development Award in the Human Capital category.

Located 50 miles southeast of Raleigh, Wayne County, North Carolina, is a predominantly rural community of 115,644 residents spread across 553 square miles. Its eclectic economic terrain features a large agribusiness and consumer foods sector, as well as manufacturers, distribution operations, a sizable state healthcare facility, a private liberal arts college, and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. Such diversification, along with the presence of



Automotive component manufacturer Uchiyama America is among the industrial employers taking part in WORKS.

large public-sector employers, keeps the county's unemployment rate at or below state and national joblessness figures.

BUILDING A NEW-LOOK WORKFORCE

In mid-2006, with the U.S. and North Carolina economies growing at healthy clips, Wayne County employers had begun noting the difficulty of filling vacant positions with qualified workers. County leaders – led by Mike Haney, WCDA's existing industry specialist – soon began conversing about the scarcity of skilled, available workers. Also taking part were County Manager Lee Smith; Wayne Community College President Kay Albertson; Bill Pate,

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A student sharpens his machining skills at Wayne Community College, a key partner in WORKS.

head of the local office of the North Carolina Employment Security Commission; Steve Hicks, president of the Wayne County Chamber of Commerce; and others. In all, about 20 leaders from business, government, education, community, and economic development organizations agreed that a new, bold workforce solution was needed.

The answer would lay in the widespread acquisition by Wayne County workers of Career Readiness Certificates (CRCs), an assessment-based credential that gives employers, educators, economic developers, and new and existing members of the workforce a uniform measure of key employment skills. CRCs are based on WorkKeys® tests, the industry standard for employee assessment developed by ACT, Inc., a longtime not-for-profit leader in college-admissions testing that also provides workforce development solutions. North Carolina, along with a handful of other states, adopted CRCs in the mid-2000s as a means to measure – and boost, where needed – a job applicant’s prospects for success in a given position or career choice.

Though WorkKeys® offers an array of nine separate tests, the CRC is granted based on performance in three core areas: locating information, reading for information, and applied math. CRC seekers scoring at the “Gold” level are considered qualified for 90 percent of the jobs that have been profiled and entered into a national database maintained by ACT, Inc.; those with a “Silver” CRC satisfy requirements for 65 percent of those jobs, while a “Bronze” level certification indicates workers and students are ready for 35 percent of profiled jobs. With CRC in hand, workers have a credible and portable seal of workplace readiness that gives them an advantage in regional and national employment markets.

Dramatic increases in the number of CRC holders in Wayne County – the “supply” side of the workforce innovation equation – was paired with efforts to boost the number of employers in the county seeking applicants with the credential. The “demand” side involved convincing companies to invest time and

effort in job “profiling,” a process whereby positions are exhaustively deconstructed into a list of tasks and matched against specific skills and competency levels. Companies are able to express preferences for CRC holders when recruiting, reducing legal and business risks associated with hiring, trimming workforce turnover rates, and enabling keener customization of in-house training programs.

SHARED INTEREST. SHARED VISION.

Powerful as it is, CRCs and WorkKeys® would be only the means, not an end, to the WORKS strategy. They have been the tools county leaders use to support existing industries and sharpen distinctions between Wayne County and competing business destinations. Making WORKS work required, first and foremost, leadership.

By January 2007, after meeting monthly since the prior summer, a core group of four county leaders had its WORKS plan in place. The plan set forth a strategy for transforming the county’s workforce assets by elevating both the supply and demand for workers holding CRCs. At the heart of the supply strategy was a “pipeline” approach that concentrated heavily on high school students who would soon be moving into the laborforce.

Officials of the Wayne County Public Schools volunteered to pilot the systematic WorkKeys® testing of all seniors at three of the county’s seven public high schools. The move was a bold one: traditionally, public schools are the entities most often singled out for criticism when a rural community’s workforce is found wanting. But Wayne County’s secondary education officials were

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Those hoping to earn Career Readiness Certificates undergo testing at Wayne Community College.



CRC hopefuls in Wayne County include longtime members of the workforce, as well as high school juniors and seniors.

confident their students would hold up well. What's more, WorkKeys® could be used to help educators identify opportunities for improving secondary curricula, reduce dropout rates, and spark interest in career advisory programs.

Out of a pool of some 50 applicants, county leaders selected Diane Ivey to coordinate the WORKS program. A 25-year veteran of the North Carolina Community College System, Ivey had a rich background in eastern North Carolina workforce development programs in general and, more specifically, job profiling. The coordinator position would include promotion, community outreach, grant-writing and program review responsibilities, in addition to an obvious leading role in conducting job profiles.

Though some might have found such an eclectic array of responsibilities daunting, Ivey did not. She immediately saw WORKS as more than just another joint exercise between economic and workforce developers. With leadership coming from the school superintendent, community college president, economic developers, and county commissioners, there was a clear commitment to doing more than “scratching the surface” of Wayne County's long-term labor-force challenges.

ASSEMBLING THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Funding would also be needed. WorkKeys® testing comes with a \$10 price tag per person for each of the three exams. On the demand side, job profiling also has its costs: a qualified profiler expends about 40 hours gathering input from employee “subject matter experts” about tasks required of them, undertaking job “shadowing,” gauging skills levels, and creating the final reports detailing the profile. Job profiling typically costs around \$1,500, and that figure may increase as positions become more technically complex.

Collaboration among community college and K-12 educators, economic developers, business leaders, and others did not go unnoticed by the county's elected officials. Impressed with the blueprint for WORKS, the Wayne County Board of Commissioners approved an initial appropriation to the program of \$100,000 in 2007-08 – underwriting the full-time WORKS coordinator position at Wayne Community College and covering some of the costs of program promotion and job profiling.

North Carolina's Eastern Region, the 13-county regional economic development partnership based nearby in Kinston, also saw early on the promise of what Wayne County leaders were doing – both inside the county and as a potential model similar communities in the region might replicate. As part of its own grants program to encourage workforce innovation and other capacity-building efforts throughout its largely rural landscape, the Eastern Region invested \$58,500 in WORKS in 2008 to defray the costs of WorkKeys® testing and job profiling.

As WORKS gained traction, it was able to sustain financial support. For 2009-10, Wayne County provided \$150,000 for the program, while North Carolina's Eastern Region also stepped up its support as part of a leading role Wayne County now plays in a multi-county CRC initiative known as “ASPIRE” (Assessing Skills for Performance in a Rebounding Economy). For 2009-2010, the Eastern Region, one of North Carolina's seven state-funded regional development organizations,



Machinists at insulation manufacturer Reuel, Inc. in Goldsboro have taken part in the WorkKeys initiative.



Machinist positions such as this one at Reuel, Inc. were among the first to be profiled under WORKS.

allocated \$225,626 in grant funds to ASPIRE, pursuant to a multi-year strategy to vertically and horizontally integrate workforce and economic development service providers and employers in the region.

Regional developers have been eager to tailor CRCs to fit industry cluster targets. The Eastern Region, for instance, has recently seen new momentum behind efforts to cultivate an aerospace cluster as Spirit AeroSystems ramps up production of a new 500,000-square-foot manufacturing site at the Global TransPark in Kinston. As the firm begins hiring for what will ultimately be a 1,031-person workforce in the region over the coming five years, Spirit intends to give priority consideration to CRC holders. Similarly, defense-aviation supplier AAR Corp., which opened a manufacturing facility in Wayne County in 2006, was an early participant in the WORKS initiative.

MARKETING THE VISION

Eastern Region officials, like their counterparts in Wayne County, have viewed CRCs as a common platform for employers, workers, educators, economic developers, and human resource professionals to identify, assess, and improve labor assets – both as a means of supporting the success of existing industry and a strategy for boosting overall marketability for arriving businesses.



Defense and aviation industry supplier AAR has participated in the WORKS initiative.



Worker at aviation supplier AAR, which employs 200 in Wayne County.

Making the market for WORKS – stoking both the supply and demand sides of the program – has largely been a function of aggressive promotion. County commissioners allocated \$5,000 for advertising the CRC in local media, a sum matched by the Wayne County Development Alliance. The program team purchased radio spots and utilized airtime on public access cable television. Their most effective advertising format: ads placed in the Sunday classified pages of the local newspaper, the *Goldboro News-Argus*, a locally owned daily which has written extensively and supportively about the program through its coverage of business and education news.

As in building demand for any product or service, WORKS leaders found success through persistence. High school students did not immediately appreciate the program’s relevance to them and were slow to embrace it. That was especially true for college-bound seniors, as well as their parents. Such reluctance was behind the decision of Wayne County Public Schools to initially require WorkKeys® testing by high school seniors. After the program’s first year, the requirement was extended to juniors, too, in an effort to give those students achieving modest scores a full year to sharpen their skills before re-taking WorkKeys® prior to graduation.

Ongoing outreach also was necessary in making the WORKS case to employers. Program leaders maintained a busy schedule of speeches and presentations to local business, community, and civic organizations. At first, interest was limited, with only a few firms willing to go first on a program that was largely untested. But their positive experiences, combined with regular appearances at Rotary Club and chamber of commerce functions, stirred participation among a long list of Wayne County businesses. Non-industrial employers such as the local hospital system are also now exploring participation in WORKS.

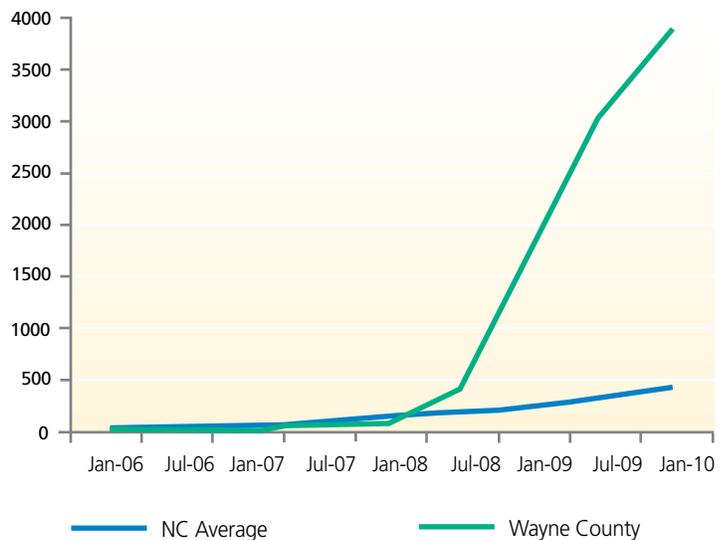
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BUILDING A REGIONAL PIPELINE OF CERTIFIED WORKERS

In assessing the impact of WORKS, numbers easily tell the story. As of November 2009, no North Carolina county had more workers with CRCs in hand than Wayne County. In fact, though the county represents just 1.16 percent of the state’s workforce, Wayne County’s 3,652 CRC holders accounted for more than ten percent of North Carolina workers earning the designation (see graph).

Though WORKS officials have yet to collect hard data regarding direct benefits derived by CRC holders, similar programs elsewhere have begun reporting evidence that workers earning certifications enjoy advantages over those who do not. Florida’s “Ready to Work” program, begun in 2007, tracked wage levels for early classes of participants. It found that certificate earners achieved comparably higher wage increases than survey participants without certificates. Similarly, job seekers holding certificates were placed into desired positions at measurably higher rates. A 2010 survey by workforce development officials in Georgia revealed that fully 93 percent of those who had participated in the state’s “Work Ready” program, a WorkKeys®-based credentialing system akin to WORKS, would recommend the program to others.

COMPARISON: Wayne County Actual & North Carolina Average CRCs Awarded



In explaining the success of WORKS, those intimate with the program and its evolution believe there is no substitute for leadership and a spirit of collaboration. They cite the strong strategic support the project won early on from Wayne County commissioners and the county school board – elected officials who are in many communities often mired in disagreement. A generous appropriation from the county – by 2009-10, a total of \$399,000 had been allocated by county government – along with the risk school officials undertook in mandating student WorkKeys® testing, were both clear and visible indicators that local leaders understood the significant rewards WORKS could bring the county's economy. Sustaining the WORKS initiative in the years ahead will require an ongoing financial commitment by Wayne County, along with grants from state and federal government sources and philanthropic entities. Fees collected

by the program for job profiling and other business services constitute another revenue channel that can help sustain WORKS into the future, its leaders say.

The program's success also is a product of its committed tactical management. The centrality of the Wayne County Development Alliance, which employs a full-time existing industry support position, is another critical factor in WORKS' success. WCDA's Mike Haney gave

The participation by Mt. Olive Pickle Company in WORKS helped convince other large employers to join the initiative.



AT MT. OLIVE PICKLE CO., WORKS AIMED HIGH

For the past 84 years, Mt. Olive Pickle Co. has kept ahead of its competitors by staying current with changes in consumer tastes and utilizing the latest production technologies. The company, the largest privately-held pickle maker in the U.S., also has a reputation for embracing workforce innovation. When Wayne County, NC, launched its WORKS initiative, the firm was among the first employers to enlist.

"Our company has very low turnover," explains Chris Martin, human resources manager at Mt. Olive. The tenure of most of the company's 500 year-round employees easily outpaces the 12- to 15-year life cycle of the plant's production equipment. "As technology changes, we have to do a lot of internal training," says Martin. In 2009, Mt. Olive Pickle spent \$175,000 on in-house training. WORKS, in addition to other benefits, has enabled the firm to pinpoint its training budget around specific skill deficits uncovered through WorkKeys® testing. "The program has shown us where we need to focus," says Martin, who was president of the Wayne County Human Resources Association in 2008.

As WORKS got underway, Martin collaborated with WORKS program coordinator Diane Ivey in profiling two specific jobs at Mt. Olive: machine operator and machine operator mechanic. Both jobs are critical to the smooth operation of the company's computer-driven pasteurization, fermentation, jarring, sealing, labeling, and sorting systems. Martin assembled a cross-section of 12 to 15 employees engaged in those jobs, known in WorkKeys® parlance as "subject-matter experts" (SMEs). SMEs logged several hours with profilers zeroing in on precise tasks and skill levels required of jobs.

"Profiling is fairly labor-intensive – companies thinking about doing this have to be able to front-end load it," Martin explains. She advises those undertaking profiling to urge SMEs to focus on skill levels that ensure the *highest* level of employee success. "When we were profiling our first job, our SMEs wanted to look at the absolute *bottom* level you could accept, when what we were really looking for was what a really good employee should have," Martin recalls. "That was more a matter of communications."

Once profiles were complete, employees at Mt. Olive began taking

WorkKeys® tests in applied math, reading for information, locating information, and applied technology. "We assured all our employees that there would be no negative repercussions from any of the testing," says Martin, who also completed the exams. "What stood out to us was that a number of machine operators needed help with the technology end of it," she recalls. "So we are designing in-house training programs to bring those skills up."

The positive experience at Mt. Olive Pickle and other early WORKS participants helped encourage other Wayne County employers to take part in the program. Company president Bill Bryan, a longtime local business leader, regularly and visibly talked up the program's real-world value. Once facility managers and industry executives saw Bryan and other known, respected business people supporting the program, they began getting in touch with either the Wayne Community College's Diane Ivey or Mike Haney, existing industry specialist at the Wayne County Development Alliance, in order to learn more. "In the end," Martin says, "you have to generate momentum and excitement."



Existing employees and new-hires at Franklin Bakery, a consumer foods industry employer in Wayne County, have participated in WORKS.

the project a reliable, ready-to-go bridge to the county's industrial community, in addition to his pivotal position on the WORKS Steering Committee. But more was needed, and county officials were quick to understand that such a sweeping initiative required full-time execution by a designated program manager, and all agreed that the local community college would be the ideal place to house and support such a person. In their selection of an experienced job profiler with deep knowledge of the region's economy and strong skills in outreach and communications, county officials gave WORKS the credible face and confident voice needed to solidify a broad base of community support.

Regional network-building is now pushing the success of WORKS out to neighboring counties in eastern North Carolina – most of which look out at a similar economic landscape and a comparable array of workforce challenges. Under the auspices of ASPIRE, Wayne County business and educational leaders are now guiding counterparts in nearby Carteret, Craven, Duplin, Greene, Jones, Lenoir, and Pitt counties, which are moving forward regionally to boost the CRC-holding workforce as new and expanding marine trades, logistics, life science, aviation and aerospace, and consumer foods industries seek to build, grow, and maintain globally competitive operations in the region in the coming years. 🌐

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