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Certifying readiness for entry-level jobs

New program tests workers on skills needed on the job

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Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News
Martinique Purdue-Castellanos, right, found new confidence in her abilities after doing well on the National Work Readiness Credential exam. At left is proctor Terry Patterson.



Nickia Garcia ponders a question on the National Work Readiness Credential Exam.

A new national test intended to spare employers from the expense of hiring unprepared entry-level workers has local people signing up to spend three hours answering questions like this:

If the boss gives you and a team of workers an afternoon deadline to finish a project and everyone in the office leaves without finishing, what do you do? Wrap up alone? Turn off the lights and go home? Tell the boss?

"I personally would take the initiative to complete the project. Not cut off the lights and go home as we think people do, do," said Sherryl Weems, the associate vice provost at the University at Buffalo's downtown Educational Opportunity Center, where about 20 people have taken the test since scheduling began last month. "We're very hopeful that it will work," she said of the potential of the National Work Readiness Credential. Employers with jobs that account for more than half of all new openings in the state each year - about 145,000 - say high turnover costs thousands of dollars for each lost worker. The new test, they say, could lead to better trained staff who can endure.

"I'm excited," said Valerie DeBerry, a director at Kaleida Health system of hospitals and health care, who came to hear a recent explanation at the EOC. "What I truly hope is that the educational systems will be able to take this and use it."

Some 70 companies across the state were consulted in the past four years in developing the test of reading, math, verbal comprehension and judgment. "The impetus for this whole project came from business. This isn't one of those government things that government cooked up," said Doug Reamer, principal statistician at the state Department of Labor.

The price of a single premature departure, which happens often in entry-level trades, ranges from \$2,000 to \$5,000 and more in training and recruiting costs, depending on a company's size.

Entry-level is defined as jobs that don't require a college degree or involve managing. The category accounts for 51 percent of annual new openings in New York: from hospitality to retail, health care, manufacturing, temp agencies and government.

"Entry-level occupations are typically in industries that have high turnover," said Reamer. "McDonald's keeps churning people through."

Those helping to draft the test included a test company, other states, Reamer, Department of Labor staff, Weems and the others on the governor-appointed board she is a member of. The \$3.2 million in development costs were paid for by five states, Washington, D.C., and the Junior Achievement student business educator. New York's share, which included lots of focus groups, was \$1 million.

One Buffalo woman who took the test last week reported the experience made her realize she was more prepared for work than she'd given herself credit for. She had good, relaxed answers to the oral questions, which reminded her of a job interview.

"I'm a quick learner so I just needed to take the test to prove to myself that I could do it," said Martinique Purdue-Castellanos, 28, who is studying for her high school diploma as one of the 2,000 adults who come to the EOC each year. "I loved doing it, to tell you the truth."

Eighth-grade level

The test combines evaluation of interpersonal "soft" skills with "hard" basics of eighth-grade-level reading and math. A sample math question asks how to make change on \$50, if the purchase is \$20 and the customer has a coupon for a 5 percent rebate. For now the EOC is applying test principals in the courses it offers that include tax preparation, nail technician training and Microsoft computer certification.

"It is simple information," said Weems, "but the application is sometimes very challenging."

Since October some 125 people have taken the exam at 50 sites in 17 participating states - from Florida to Washington. Within the next few months of a tryout "launch" phase, the \$65 test is free to people who have been doing entry-level work for six months or less. During this phase, planners will make adjustments according to feedback they get from test takers and their supervisors.

The 5,000 people who planners expect to test during the trial, will be part of a study that will track how they do in their jobs. Eventually, if the test works as people hope, credentialed workers will have an asset employers will vie for, and employers will keep more of those they hire. "It's not one-sided," said Karen Coleman, a director of program development at the Department of Labor.

To Tim Pfohl, a director at Suburban Adult Services, a national credential that measures such basic skills would parallel worker training his Elma organization started last month.

The grant-funded five-week classes include the same soft skills addressed in the new national credential. Pfohl offered this sample scenario that some workers need instruction for: What do you do when you're alarm doesn't go off and you'll be late for work?

Some, Pfohl said, don't know to call work. Instead they stay home.

The need for workers who know the right answer and how to serve and guide people with disabilities is so great that the Oshei Foundation gave \$420,000 to revive and expand Suburban's training. The money will pay for three years worth of training 10 times a year for a total of 360 people. There are openings for many more. Each year his organization and five others participating in the program have about 600 entry-level jobs to fill.

"There's a definite demand," Pfohl said.

Employers interested

Employers, such as DeBerry, who came to a recent presentation about the test at the EOC, also admitted that finding qualified workers is tricky.

"We certainly have a huge turnover of entry level employees," said David Zapfel, a project director of strategic work force planning for Catholic Health System. "I need to learn more."

While it is too soon to know how the test will help, his organization has about 8,500 workers in its hospitals and elsewhere, and would be interested in interviewing people with the new certification. "It's certainly to their credit that they took the test," Zapfel said.

Aaron Keys-Rodgers, who is studying for his high school diploma at the EOC, had a similar reaction. On the morning that employers were hearing about the credential, he listened to its premise and thought it sounded helpful.

To earn money as he makes his way toward college to study nursing, Keys-Rodgers has a job as a cashier at Wal-Mart. It was a hard one to get. The store wanted evidence of cash-register experience, which he felt lucky to have from another job.

Without that, he felt sure the new credential would have given him an advantage.

"It would make the people going to hire you look at the certificate and go, "He knows what he's doing," " Keys-Rodgers said.