



Janice Urbanik, executive director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce in Greater Cincinnati

Can a cooperative regional approach help to resolve the skills gap?

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

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Present

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Summary

Janice Urbanik of Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW) in the Greater Cincinnati region shares her organization's efforts to fill a gap that also exists in the Twin Cities: employers have open jobs, but can't find people with the right skills to fill them, despite the existence of a sizeable pool of unemployed or underemployed people. She asserts that this skills gap in Cincinnati's tri-state region is limiting employers' ability to compete, individual's ability to provide for their families and the region's ability to grow existing companies and attract new ones.

Urbanik's partnership is a private-sector-led collaboration of 150 organizations that works: (1) to connect businesses that have existing employment needs to qualified workers available right now; (2) to build career pathways in the four targeted industries of health care, manufacturing, construction and IT; and (3) to assure that service providers all include in their programs training in core work readiness competencies that employers have identified as just as important as the technical skills needed for a job. PCW has also started a Talent Pipeline initiative, which focuses on giving STEM experiences to students in the K-12 education system and professional development on STEM careers to their teachers.

Urbanik reports that since 2008: (1) PCW's partners have served over 7,800 adults, with 80 percent of them getting jobs and 73 percent retaining those jobs for at least 12 months; (2) people who have gone through a PCW career pathway program have a 40 percent higher employment rate and up to

58 percent higher earnings than people in the region who've gone through more traditional training programs; and (3) people who've gone through a PCW pathway program earn an average of \$7,500 more per year than before, pumping an additional \$7.3 million into the regional economy.

PCW, Urbanik notes, is currently putting together a plan to reach the broad goal of 90 percent of the regional workforce being gainfully employed and earning at least 200 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of four.

Biography

Janice Urbanik is executive director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce, a partnership in the tri-state region of Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. The partnership, an initiative of the United Way of Cincinnati, is focused on meeting employer demand by growing the skills of the region's current and future workforce. The organization was created in 2008, building on a 10-year history of collaboration to meet regional workforce needs by businesses, workforce investment boards, educational institutions, philanthropic funders and community organizations.

Urbanik's focus is developing the talent supply chains for the regional industry sectors with in-demand jobs by aligning education with industry needs through career pathways. She is on the Board /Leadership Council for the Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Jostin Construction, the National Network of Sector Partners and the Spirit of Construction Foundation.

She is heavily involved in efforts to increase the number of women in nontraditional careers. Urbanik and her work teams have been recognized nationally for their work in assisting underrepresented populations to attain careers in construction and manufacturing. She has a B.S. in mechanical engineering from the University of Pittsburgh.

Background

The Civic Caucus invited Janice Urbanik to discuss her organization's approach to reducing the gap between the skills required for jobs employers are trying to fill and the skills held by people in the Greater Cincinnati region's current and future workforce. Members of the Civic Caucus wondered if any of her organization's ideas and approaches could be imported to Minnesota, which is facing the same skills gap issue, as identified in the recent [Civic Caucus report on human capital](#).

Discussion

Employers have open jobs, but can't find people with the right skills to fill them. That was reported by over half the employers surveyed in the Greater Cincinnati region, according to Janice Urbanik of Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW), a tri-state initiative of the United Way of Cincinnati that includes southwestern Ohio, northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana. "That is our regional economy," she said.

Urbanik noted that in the Greater Cincinnati region:

- 30,000 jobs are open at any one time, yet 130,000 people are unemployed, underemployed, or have stopped looking for work.

- Ninety percent of jobs in the region that pay well require some postsecondary education or training.
- Nearly half of the regional workforce has no education after high school.

The skills gap in the tri-state region is limiting employers' ability to compete, individuals' ability to provide for their families and the region's ability to grow existing companies and attract new ones.

PCW is a collaboration formed in 2008 of over 150 organizations involved in workforce development and is led by employers. "We need to be sure that everything we do is in sync with meeting a stated and known employer need," Urbanik said.

She said the 150 partners include anyone who has a stake in workforce development: employers, workforce investment boards, chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, community colleges, universities, philanthropic organizations, K-12 education, etc.

The partnership works in four different industry sectors, each of which is chaired by an employer: health care, manufacturing, construction and information technology(IT). These sectors represent over 30 percent of the jobs in the region. Currently, Urbanik reported, construction accounts for 3.5 percent of the jobs; manufacturing, 11 percent; health care, 14 percent; and IT, four percent.

PCW works in three different areas:

1. Connecting jobs and job-seekers. Workforce investment boards collaborate through the Employers First Regional Workforce Network to connect businesses that have existing employment needs to qualified workers who are ready and available right now.

2. Building career pathways. The Career Pathways initiative aims to align training programs with employer needs in four targeted industries: health care, manufacturing, construction and IT; a fifth, transportation distribution and logistics will likely be added soon. According to Urbanik, PCW selected the targeted industries based on labor market data and conversations with employers that indicated there are jobs open now and into the future in those industries. Aligning education and training programs with industry needs helps individuals develop the skills they need to get in-demand jobs and helps employers access the skilled workers they need to compete. The pathways programs also assist individuals who have significant barriers to employment, such as child care needs, transportation problems, criminal records and limited English.

3. Ensuring work readiness. The work readiness collaborative consists of community-based service providers and education and training providers. It acts to ensure that service providers all include in their programs training in core work readiness competencies that employers have identified as just as important as the technical skills needed for a job. These competencies include taking initiative, dependability, time management, problem solving, writing, and dressing appropriately.

The work of PCW's partners in the Cincinnati region has been recognized as a national model in several different venues. Urbanik said the recognition includes the partnership being highlighted in a recent report by Vice President Joe Biden on workforce initiatives.

PCW serves as the facilitator of various workforce initiatives in the region and doesn't offer any direct services itself. Rather, it makes the connections between employer needs and the providers who can fill those needs, Urbanik said..

Since 2008, the work of PCW's partners has delivered the following results for adults:

- Over 7,800 people have been served; 80 percent of them have gotten jobs and 73 percent have retained those jobs for at least 12 months.
- Compared with people who have gone through more traditional training programs, people who have gone through a pathway program have a 40 percent higher employment rate and up to 58 percent higher earnings.
- People who've gone through a pathway program earn an average of \$7,500 a year more than before. Those higher wages pump an additional \$7.3 million into the regional economy.

PCW's workforce initiatives are focused on meeting employer needs, both in filling open positions and delivering a real return on investment (ROI). Urbanik said three health-care employers conducted an ROI or business value assessment and they all found positive quantitative and qualitative outcomes: reduced turnover, wage gains, increased racial diversity of their workforce, and improved staff morale and engagement.

Starting in 2013, employers encouraged PCW to get involved in the K-12 system. According to Urbanik, employers in construction, manufacturing and IT were telling PCW that the "pipeline" was dry and that youth in the K-12 system were not being encouraged to enter those fields.

In response, PCW started its Talent Pipeline initiative, which is heavily focused on STEM experiences. Urbanik said the vision for the Talent Pipeline is that every child in every school every semester has at least one career exploration experience that helps prepare them for success after graduation. An important part of that vision, she said, is professional development for teachers, many of whom have no understanding of what working in the targeted industries is like.

During the 2013-2014 school year, the Talent Pipeline's STEM Collaborative served over 1,300 students and 500 adults by exposing them to STEM careers.

In 2011, the region set bold goals for education, income and health:

- **Education outcome goals** deal with early childhood education, kindergarten readiness, high school graduation rates and postsecondary certification attainment.
- **Health goals** are that everybody has a medical home and a regular doctor, has access to health care and rates their health as excellent or very good.
- **Income goal** is that 90 percent of the regional workforce, including people who've stopped looking for jobs, is gainfully employed. Urbanik said that figure is currently 88 percent, which means that 24,000 more people in the region need to be employed. While working towards the Income Bold Goal, Urbanik said, PCW will also be tracking whether the jobs it is helping people get lead to self-sufficiency. Right now, only 70 percent of the population is earning at least 200

percent of the federal poverty level for a family of four. That means 430,000 more people need to move above the 200 percent mark to reach the 90 percent goal. Urbanik said PCW is currently putting together a plan to reach the income goal by 2020.

The majority of families in the region have three or more members; a high percentage has a single wage-earner. Urbanik said the demographic of single wage earners and female heads of household is rather uniform across the region, that is, in urban, rural and suburban areas. "It's not just an inner-city problem," she said. "It's widespread."

PCW is private-sector led, but government is involved. Urbanik noted that the workforce investment boards get federal and state funding and that PCW has gotten several state, local and federal grants. She said a key component of PCW's work is policy advocacy, so the organization partners with government agencies on policy discussions and questions. But, she pointed out, no elected officials currently serve on PCW committees.

PCW also works with higher-end jobs in the workforce. Urbanik said employers have a big need for engineers, as well as for machinists and welders. In health care the pathways programs top out at the bachelor's degree nursing level. For construction, PCW deals with construction manager and engineering positions and in manufacturing, with electrical, mechanical, systems and manufacturing engineers. In IT, PCW works almost exclusively at the bachelor's level, targeting people who lost their IT jobs because they didn't keep their skills up or people at the associate or bachelor's level who want to change careers and go into IT.

Several career-technical education systems serve the Greater Cincinnati region. Urbanik noted the following:

- **Great Oaks in southwestern Ohio.** It is one of the largest career-technical education systems in the country for both high school and adult workforce development. Since 1970, Great Oaks has been providing career development, workforce development and economic development services to individuals, business, industry, labor, communities and other organizations in southwest Ohio. "They are heavily engaged in everything we're doing in the health care, construction and manufacturing pathways," Urbanik said.
- **Butler Tech in Ohio**, one of the state's largest career-technical schools, is very similar to Great Oaks, serving both high school students and adults. But it serves a different part of the region.
- **In Kentucky, the school districts themselves** offer career-tech education. Urbanik said each county has been taking a different approach. One county transitioned their career-tech schools into career academies, each geared toward a different vocation: manufacturing, biomedical, media arts and energy careers. Students go to their home schools in the morning and to the career academies in the afternoons.
- **Community colleges** are very engaged in everything PCW is doing. They have programs aligned with PCW's career pathways.

Urbanik said employers in the region participate in curriculum planning at these institutions through advisory councils and have even written the curriculum for a new manufacturing apprenticeship

program started by PCW and heavily supported by two workforce investment boards. The employers developed an RFP(Request for Proposal) for educational institutions and picked which schools would be delivering the curriculum for various specialties, such as machining and welding.

Even with these good training programs, it is sometimes a struggle to get people into the classes. For example, Urbanik said, Great Oaks struggles every year to fill its plumbing program. When an interviewer asked why this is so difficult, Urbanik responded that for a long time, we as a society devalued career-tech education, promoted college for everyone and claimed that these industries were dying. "That kind of culture shift takes a long time to move," she said.

As an example, she cited a focus group she facilitated with eight mothers of middle school and high school students. She talked to them about various careers and, she said, "They all said, 'college, college, college.' They believe a college degree will give their children choices." At the end of the session, she asked them about having their children take part in an apprenticeship program after high school, in which the participants would start at \$15 an hour and within three years be making \$50,000. The employer would pay for the program, resulting in no college debt. "Every one of the mothers said 'no,'" Urbanik said.

The best training is done in partnership between employers and the educational institutions. Urbanik believes the employer should lead any company-specific training. "But apprenticeship programs or entry-level or mid-level skill training is best done in partnership, because many employers have similar needs and costs can be reduced by sharing across several employers" she said.

Job growth is in the suburbs. Urbanik noted that there are unemployed and underemployed people in the suburbs, as well as in the inner city. But it's hard to get to the suburban jobs without a car, since bus systems aren't as prevalent in the suburbs. She said there are some efforts to do redevelopment and bring back urban manufacturing closer to where the population centers are. But it's cheaper to build on farmland than to do demolition and rebuilding, she said.

Despite the collaboration in the tri-state region, some public officials in each state still want to recruit jobs from the other two states. Urbanik said that even though there is a regional economic development group that "works hard to pitch the region," states and localities in the region are still heavily involved in offering financial incentives for businesses to locate or relocate in their state or city. "That's an ever-present reality that complicates getting organizations to work collaboratively on regional initiatives," she said.

Cincinnati's airport is a major sore spot in the region, since it is no longer a hub, following major changes with Delta. Urbanik said the number of flights to the airport has been cut severely, "fares have gone through the roof," and global companies can't get direct flights overseas. "It's a huge issue," she said.

While the region has, in the aggregate, met the overall goal that 85 percent of high school students graduate, there are big school-by-school differences. Urbanik noted that the career technical school in the Cincinnati public school district, which is predominantly African American, has a graduation rate of 51 percent. There are still educational disparities, which a multitude of programs are working to address, she said.

The manufacturing base in the region was severely hit by the recession because of a dependence on the auto industry. "But it's coming back big," Urbanik said, along with the aviation industry.