

Helping trainees get the skills that businesses want

Red Wing Shoe, 3M, Jennie-O Foods, Fingerhut Companies and Abbott Northwestern Hospital may have little in common in their services and customers. But they share one thing: Each has participated in a state-sponsored effort to boost the skills of the work force. The Minnesota Job Skills Partnership is the agency.

Better skills can lead to better jobs and higher wages for workers, and to better productivity and enhanced competitiveness for businesses. Providing better skills can mean improved capability of Minnesota colleges and universities to serve the changing skill and technology needs of industry and workers.

The Job Skills Partnership should be a key component of any high-skills, high-wage strategy for Minnesota. The three-person state agency makes a useful public contribution far beyond its size or budget. In slightly more than a decade, it has helped more than 25,000 Minnesotans get

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training or retraining in more than 50 educational institutions. Nearly 300 companies, big and small, have participated.



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Eighty-five percent or more of the trainees get the skills the business sponsors want. Most come from existing jobs with the sponsors, although some trainees seek beginning jobs.

The state's annual support has been about \$1.8 million. But the program is much more than the "business welfare" that critics of subsidies complain about. First, business must provide a cash or in-kind match, so the program is market-driven. Second, the training improves the abilities and potential livelihoods of workers. Third, the state money does not go to businesses but to the schools, with the result being a stronger educational infrastructure.

► Consider St. Cloud State University's experience providing robotics retraining for Frigidaire workers. The company and university officials designed training that will benefit both workers and students, who will gain real-world experience and potential job opportunities. A new lab and classroom at Frigidaire will serve both workers and students.

► Or consider the technology transfer involved in a partnership of 3M, three small central Minnesota manufacturing firms and St. Cloud State University. Supportive of its three small suppliers, 3M contributed a proprietary technology for factory processes. The university organized the training for the three suppliers.

Since 1992, the activity has become a consortium of two universities, four technical colleges, 3M, Atscott Manufacturing, Minnesota Technology Inc. and the Job Skills Partnership. The program, the consortium says, "can improve product quality, reduce unit costs, waste and cycle times, scale up production capacity, improve material flow and plant layout, identify and eliminate production bottlenecks, simplify production/capacity planning and scheduling, and improve paperwork flow."

The consortium later got a federal grant from a national program to help the economy adjust to declining defense spending. But the consortium's roots go back to a Job Skills Partnership grant of only \$139,000. The consortium has sought to reach several dozen Minnesota companies employing fewer than 500 people.

► Consider how a small grant for woodworking industry retraining at Northwest Technical College in Bemidji led to creation of a two-year associate of applied science degree. And how later, the University of Minnesota-Crookston added upper grades so that a four-year degree could be earned.

The Job Skills Partnership has inspired other government-assisted training programs. The Legislature has provided \$300,000 to St. Paul to train entry workers for businesses, with a limit of \$25,000 per training activity (compared to a ceiling of \$200,000 for partnership grants). Legislators also appropriated \$200,000 for Minneapolis, where local officials have been seeking the necessary business partners required by the Job Skills Partnership. The officials want to create an academy of manufacturing and engineering technology at North Community High School.

The state's Department of Economic Security has a pilot program to provide training grants for at-risk workers. The new Governor's Workforce Development Council in February approved a department grant of \$107,000 (later raised to \$136,000) for Stroh Brewery in St. Paul. A Stroh representative testified that the company had had employee turnover of 60 percent. Such a high rate suggests management problems. There also have been concerns that Stroh would close the brewery, but agency officials got assurances from the company that it wants to keep the brewery open. Presumably, the training will help.

Rather than being merely a departmental program, the Job Skills Partnership has an unusual status. It's housed in the Department of Trade and Economic Development, but has its own board of directors. Before that, it was attached to other agencies.

As the Workforce Development Council moves forward with planning and coordination of workforce training, it should recognize the Job Skills Partnership's valuable contribution to workers' training, business-education cooperation and improved capabilities of higher education. Other agencies have eyed the partnership's funding, which the 1996 Legislature increased slightly.

To change its status would mean tampering with a government program that clearly works — to the benefit of workers, business, education and the state's economy.

— Leonard Inskip is a Star Tribune columnist and editorial writer.