We recently survived another campaign season in which we saw rigorous battles for President, Congress, Senate, and state legislative races across the country. Record money was spent, the ads were negative, and tensions between both parties remain at epic levels. I will leave it up to the pundits to dissect the political ramifications coming out of this election, but at the end of the day these leaders have a job to do. The time for rhetoric is over, especially when it comes to establishing important public policy to solve the skills gap and crafting a workforce development strategy that keeps the United States competitive in the global marketplace.

I have participated in numerous forums, symposiums, panel events, conferences, and roundtables focused on solving the workforce skills gap. This is not a new issue. Those of us in business have a pretty good handle on what needs to be done when it comes to the challenges facing workforce development. Friends, this isn’t rocket science. If our leaders in Washington are serious about putting people back to work, having America’s educational system placed at the front of the class, and building a growing economy for generations to come, there are some simple things we can implement right away to solve the skills gap and develop a strong foundation for today’s workforce and generations to come.

By Sandra Westlund-Deenihan
President and Design Engineer,
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STRATEGY
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

OPMENT

EGY
BUY-IN FROM OUR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

As employers, we need to be prepared and take advantage of opportunities to work with education systems to establish “employer-driven” programs. They would be designed to train our workforce with the skills needed to compete successfully in the workplace. Oftentimes, college curriculum is not geared towards manufacturing or vocational students, nor does it consist of the type of training needed for today’s worker and workplace. To this point, employers and community colleges should work together in identifying, educating, and employing a workforce that may not necessarily come from a traditional four-year university. Employers need to “fastrack” workforce development by putting our own resources into training and encourage government leaders to prioritize the need for post-secondary training for working adults and non-traditional students. In the end, employers will benefit and candidates with ample skills will be available to fill skilled positions.

Although employers should serve as the driving force, it is imperative that our state and national elected officials embrace a policy agenda that supports adult and non-traditional students—such as dislocated workers, immigrants, veterans, and incumbent workers—to get the training they need to re-enter the workforce. These are populations that are continuously overlooked as viable candidates for skilled positions. This agenda should include prioritizing post-secondary training, providing financial aid to part-time adult workers, and collaborating with community colleges on providing aid for specialized training. The public workforce system is currently being juggled through an array of separately funded employment and training programs that are well intentioned, but are typically operated without effective coordination or collaboration.

Implementing a coordinated effort shepherded by our educational institutions will help streamline the training process. With the unemployment rate continuing to struggle at record highs, this is a great way to get people back into the work force. We can only retain all the highly skilled, high paying jobs through innovation and educational training.

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STEM:

We must reach students at an early age and ensure they are properly equipped with the needed skill sets to succeed. Unfortunately, our girls and young women are often forgotten when it comes to recruiting efforts in fields requiring a strong skill set in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Considering our nation’s needs, we can’t forget any part of our population when it comes to filling STEM jobs.
Last year, I worked in collaboration with The National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity Education Foundation (NAPE-EF) and my local Illinois School District, ISDU-46, to secure funding through an innovative grant program operated by Motorola Solutions to provide students the education, job training, and experience to further their learning in STEM fields. Through the grant, a “STEM Equity Pipeline” program was created, resulting in higher test scores and increased female enrollment in Advance Placement, STEM coursework, as well as a desire to pursue careers in related fields.

At the end of the day, we need to see more public-private partnerships like this being developed to establish learning opportunities in STEM education. This is a great model for tapping into resources and opportunities at the local level to plant seeds that will continue to grow for years to come. This is a great vehicle for focusing our energy, resources, and training to create a pipeline of workers, leaders, and entrepreneurs for the next generation.

**CREDENTIALING/CERTIFICATION:**

The credentialing process has become an invaluable tool to me as an employer in the manufacturing industry. National Career Readiness Certification (NCRC) is highly valued as it lets me know the person has credentialled and certified skills needed for the
workplace with applicable skills for our shop room floor. National Institute of Metalworking Standards (NIMS) Credentialing is also very important as it validates for me, the employer, whether my employee has the right skills to perform to quality standards.

By encouraging our elected leaders to establish a national standard requiring our learning institutions to proactively implement certification and credential programs, employers will have a large talent pool of well-trained and skilled individuals who are ready to work. This ensures that our workforce has the same set of basic skills and understandings, putting everyone on an equal playing field.

**DIGITAL LITERACY:**

The United States is lagging behind other countries in implementing digital policies and establishing a curriculum to develop technology literate students. Let’s be honest—literacy in technology has become equally as important as literacy in the English language. In response to this growing need, employers can take steps to keep their workforce up to speed with the latest developments through implementing on-site training programs like I have done at Quality Float Works, Inc. We have made the investment in technology to provide distance learning opportunities to ensure employees grow and learn along the way as new advancements are made. There is an abundance of online learning tools offered from professional member associations as well as free government resources, including several great programs through the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA), providing continuing education and certification opportunities. Though all of these resources have been made available to us, it is our duty as employers to make sure our employees remain up-to-speed in order to compete in a global marketplace.
BUSINESS INCENTIVES:

As our elected officials move forward in exploring new ways to solve the skills gap and spur economic growth, all options should be on the table. Programs like the Employer Training Investment Program (ETIP) in Illinois, a competitive program for Illinois-based manufacturers and service companies to facilitate upgrading the skills of their workers, is a great example of the government working with business to create extra incentives for growth. This innovative program enables companies to compete, expand, explore, and implement new and efficient practices into their operations. Participating companies can apply for ETIP grants reimbursing them for up to 50% of eligible costs related to training employees.

Programs like ETIP need to be implemented at the national level as this provides the best way to ensure we stay competitive moving forward. It dedicates resources to establishing and investing in a well-trained and abundant workforce.

The election is over and the rhetoric needs to transform into action. The overarching goal is to create a system that meets the immediate needs of employers today and adequately trains and prepares the workforce for generations to come. This will establish a solid educational foundation for the duration of a student’s participation in the public education structure. If we are going to compete in the global marketplace and develop a solid plan for shaping the workforce development agenda in this country, we must work together and share best practices to make a difference with the skills gap.

We cannot become a nation that relies on others to manufacture, create, and innovate. If we do, we will fail. We need to work together by making an investment in our workforce and taking advantage of every opportunity to create a strong talent pool of employees. If we do this, everyone wins and the American workforce will continue to be the world’s leader.

Sandra Westlund-Deenihan serves as President and Design Engineer of Quality Float Works, Inc., the premier metal float and assembly manufacturer in the county located in suburban Chicago, IL. Products are used to level liquid controls in the gas, oil, plumbing and agriculture industries. In 2011, Westlund-Deenihan was appointed to Chair the Illinois State Board of Education’s Gender Equity Advisory Committee—a committee with the purpose to advise and consult with the Illinois State Board of Education to ensure all students have equal educational opportunities to pursue high-wage, high-skill occupations leading to economic self-sufficiency.