Skilled, dedicated workforce is waiting in Greater Hazleton

Greater Hazleton continues to attract many national and international companies because it retains a proud tradition as an area populated with a large labor pool of skilled and dedicated workers who have the knowledge and work ethic to instantly fill available job openings across all industry sectors.

Pennsylvania CareerLink Luzerne County Administrator Christine Jensen said she sees many eager job hunters at the hundreds of events her office hosts in Hazleton. More than 600 people with the background and skills to obtain immediate employment attended an annual job fair hosted by PA CareerLink and the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce earlier this year.

Jensen feels the area continues to maintain its reputation as a place where residents want to be employed.

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Pennsylvania CareerLink uses the nationally-recognized WorkKeys program to ensure that local workers possess the skills that will lead to their employment success. The Luzerne County office is certified to administer the test to measure basic, foundational skill levels in potential employees and assess if they have the necessary traits employers are looking for in their available positions.

The majority of area candidates who take the WorkKeys assessment routinely rank within the acceptable skills range for the jobs they are seeking, including those in the manufacturing industry, according to PA CareerLink Luzerne County Administrator Christine Jensen.

WorkKeys was created by nationwide testing organization ACT, Inc., and is recognized by employers and workforce investment boards across the state. Those who complete the program can receive National Career Readiness certification at one of four different levels.

The program’s three components focus on job analysis, assessment and training. Job analysis looks at what skills are needed for a particular occupation. The assessment portion determines a potential employee’s current skills and compares them to the job analysis findings. The training component offers a variety of programs to address any skills gaps that were found and targets how to use allocated training funds most effectively. The test can also measure crucial soft skills in employees such as teamwork, attendance and timeliness as well as applied mathematics, locating information and reading for information.

A manager at E.S. Kluft, which manufactures and distributes luxury mattresses in the Humboldt Industrial Park in Greater Hazleton, said the WorkKeys program has been very beneficial to the company.

(Continued on page 3)
Greater Hazleton’s network of education and training partners

A skilled workforce is at the heart of successful economic development. Northeastern Pennsylvania attracts many national and international companies every year because of the area’s quality workforce and a support system of agencies that help them succeed. Here’s a look at just a few of these agencies and information about some of the programs they offer companies in our region.

PA CareerLink
The PA CareerLink offices provide services to employers in a variety of businesses and industries. Staff members can help companies with such things as pre-screening and assessment of applicants to ensure they meet job descriptions and skills qualifications and providing information regarding tax credits and grants.

These services include the WorkKeys program, which tests applicants to measure basic, foundational skill levels in potential employees and assess if they have the necessary traits employers are looking for in their available positions.

Luzerne/Schuylkill Workforce Investment Board, Inc.
Through the Luzerne/Schuylkill Workforce Investment Board, Inc., the L/S WIB employs qualify for the On-the-Job Training Program which helps provide grants to help train its workforce.

On-the-Job Training reduces the costs associated with training new employees by paying companies 50 percent of a new trainee’s wages for up to six months or $5,000. The L/S WIB works with Pennsylvania CareerLink staff who screen potential hires for program eligibility, work with companies on developing a mutually agreed-upon training contract, handle most of the paperwork and initiate a reimbursement schedule for monthly payments made directly to the company.

NEPA Consortia of Industry Partnerships
Industry Partnerships are employer/worker consortiums that bring together companies with similar products, markets and human resource needs. The L/S WIB combined the three industry partnerships of food processing, logistics and transportation, and energy into a partnership called the Northeast Pennsylvania Consortia of Industry Partnerships.

This partnership gives companies a more cost-effective way to provide their employees with training to strengthen their skill sets. Industry partnership member companies can obtain training grants that reimburse them 50 percent of the cost of employee training.

“For example, the food processing industry is experiencing an influx of new technology and automation. The partnership prioritized training in electrical and electronic and motor controls to meet the skills required by the technology upgrades. It also sponsored training for supervisors and workers preparing for promotion to management.” said Trina Moss, L/S WIB project manager for job seekers and employer services.

Northeastern Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Association
The Northeastern Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Association (MAEA) conducts training programs like basic and continuing education courses for employees, human resources skills seminars for managers, and specialized, industry-specific courses to prepare companies for future challenges. These include team leadership skills, supervisory development, management development, communication mastery, administrative professional/support staff and human resources certificate series. Programs are also available for interactive executive team building, hands-on computer training, process improvement training, purchasing training and safety training.

MAEA also designs customized training programs it can perform on site for companies. This allows businesses to devise a flexible schedule, meet their unique needs and conduct everything in a group setting so employees are trained together and work as a team.

“As the economy and technology rapidly evolve, MAEA stands ready to provide the training necessary to meet our employers’ needs,” said MAEA President Darlene J. Robbins.

The Northeastern Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Council operates the Youth Employability Skills (Y.E.S.) program throughout the region, teaming up with high schools to prepare students with the soft skills they will need to enter the workforce after graduation.

Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce
The Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce strives to be on the cutting edge of current topics,” said Chamber Vice President of Marketing Leann Fallabel. “We are continuously searching for new topics to offer and always looking for new partners to share their knowledge and expertise in their fields with their fellow chamber members and businesses from throughout Greater Hazleton.

Northeastern Pennsylvania Industrial Resource Center
The Northeastern Pennsylvania Industrial Resource Center (NEPIRC) is a not-for-profit organization that works with manufacturing companies to address their unique challenges, maximize their profitability and create regional job opportunities. NEPIRC offers programs focusing on leadership development essentials, corporate culture services, youth apprenticeship and public training, as well as career-readiness training for high school students.

“We offer specific training in certain tactical skills that employees need to possess in manufacturing to be proficient and do their job well. Once they have this essential training, they are better equipped to handle their duties,” NEPIRC Executive Director/CEO Eric J. Esoda said. “We also train managers and supervisors in the proper supervision and leadership of others. This helps to reduce employee turnover and teaches managers and supervisors how to adapt to diversity in the workplace and handle any crisis that occurs.”

Partners in Education
Partners in Education is a nonprofit organization focused on working with schools, students and employers to match the needs of industry to the skill sets being taught at the high school level. The organization also places an emphasis on introducing high school students to the career opportunities available in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

More than 20 companies and educational members have come together in the mutually beneficial partnership. Students learn which skills are required in the workplace, teachers discover how to adapt their classroom courses to teach those skills and employers have the opportunity to introduce students to their businesses. Partners in Education also sponsors the annual “Jobs for You” expo in conjunction with State Representative Tarah Toohil. This expo gives high school students a chance to meet local employers and discover more about area job opportunities.

“Partners in Education’s goal is to bridge the gap between educators, local businesses and students to develop an informed workforce. We help companies connect with local students and educators to find out what businesses are in the area and the types of jobs that are available. For example, we held a roundtable session with local human resources representatives and guidance counselors to provide companies with a chance to share what they do,” Partners in Education Executive Director Cathy Colangelo said.

Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce
The Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce provides a variety of seminars, workshops and webinars to educate employers and employees. The many topics include OSHA training, workplace safety, information technology, workers’ compensation, health care reform, business planning and human resources.

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Greater Hazleton provides multiple benefits for any industry that is looking to open a new facility. Among those many positive attributes is a large pool of unskilled labor and the highest level of integrity and productivity. Success in the manufacturing and logistics industry has always involved a team effort and employers consistently rank having a dedicated workforce as one of their keys to do business. Our region’s large labor pool is just one of a number of advantages that companies cite when growing their business operation in the Hazleton area. Other benefits also include Pennsylvania’s low operating costs compared to neighboring states and the geographical proximity to major highways, including Interstates 80, 81, 380 and 476. Many local companies have found success utilizing the diverse skills of Greater Hazleton’s workforce.

American Eagle Outfitters

American Eagle Outfitters (AEO) opened a 1-million-square-foot distribution center in Humboldt Industrial Park in 2014. Director of Operations Christine Miller said the company looked at numerous locations across the country, including several in Northeastern Pennsylvania, but ultimately decided on the Hazle Township location in part because of the talent pool of skilled workers in the area who are dedicated to their job. AEO Senior Human Resources Manager Sandra Sola said the company feels very fortunate to be in an area where they can consistently find a passion- ate and qualified workforce.

“Our associates are passionate and engaged in their work. They are innovative, we maintain a collaborative and friendly work hard to meet the needs of our customers. They possess a variety of skills including expertise in production, quality assurance and safety management. They are strong problem solvers and effective team players,” she said. “We’ve had a lot of luck finding qualified candidates for our open positions. Many of our associates have had previous work experience in distribution centers or manufacturing facilities and were able to apply their skills on day one at American Eagle Outfitters.”

The company has capitalized on the strong workforce it found in Greater Hazleton and expanded to now employ nearly 200 full-time associates in addition to approximately 1,000 seasonal employees.

“We’ve been able to develop a strong team of associates, many of whom have already been promoted,” Sola said. “We’ve seen that having a team of diverse, skilled and motivated associates has helped us to achieve a smooth transition in setting up our Humboldt distribution center and enabled us to expand our operations here.”

First Quality Nonwovens, Inc.

First Quality Nonwovens, Inc., has more than 350 workers and ranks in the top 10 in number of employees in CAN DO’s parks. Human Resources Manager, Karen Buckley said what sets First Quality’s employees apart from those at other companies is their desire to find a lifelong career.

“Our team members are energetic and looking to establish themselves in a career and not just a job. Since we are also looking to build long-term employment relationships, it is a great match. As a technical company we look for those ‘go-getters’ who want to be emerging leaders in their areas, whether in production, technical or management. Our team members value family and their impact upon their own families and their co-workers’ families and it strengthens their commitment.”

Buckley said that being team players and really investing in the company was the main reason for First Quality Nonwovens’ employees so strong.

“Our team members work very closely together and show what teamwork is all about. They are very strong in the concept that they can achieve more together. There is a thirst to learn. I have found that the workforce wants to know more about the background of the business and how what they do impacts others inside and outside of the company,” she said.

Tech Packaging, Inc.

Tech Packaging, Inc., built their facility in Humboldt Industrial Park less than two years ago and already employs more than 150 full-time workers and another 75 during its busy period. Bob Janes, the company’s founder and president, said he hasn’t had a problem attracting qualified workers to fill available positions. “We have found great people from the Hazleton area to work for our company and 75-80 percent of those hourly workers come from Greater Hazleton,” he said.

“We chose the area in large part because of its logistics, including the proximity to Interstates 81 and 80. About 75 percent of everything we ship goes into New York or the Baltimore area for Costco warehouse stores,” Janes said. “Since our company has been experiencing such a large volume of growth, we wanted a bigger location and saw the site in Humboldt Industrial Park as perfect for our needs.”

United States Cold Storage

U.S. Cold Storage, a frozen food distribution facility, has also had success with its Hazleton location and expanded several times over the last few years. An average of 150 trucks a day transport products from the facility, with an additional amount being transported by rail. Larry Alderfer, U.S. Cold Storage vice president of corporate development and logistics, had many positive things to say about the local workforce and Greater Hazleton.

“U.S. Cold Storage has assembled a talented, multifaceted workforce from the pool of local residents. The cooperation we have received from the local, county and state governments has been outstanding. Greater Hazleton is a special place to live and work. We found Humboldt Industrial Park an ideal location for a distribution center because of the close proximity to Interstates 81 and 80. In addition, the dynamic growth and excellent workforce in the area matched what we looked for in selecting a site for a new location,” Alderfer said.

“When we made the commitment to come to Hazle Township, we knew we would be building on a very special place in a very special community. It’s a superb location with superb people.”

WorkKeys (continued from page 1)

"It helped us quite a bit and allowed us to bring on people more quickly than we normally would have," the manager said. "It was also a huge help to have the program offset some of our training costs."

WorkKeys assists employers in Luzerne and Schuylkill counties with selecting qualified employees by narrowing the field of job candidates and aids economic development organizations in bringing new industry and jobs to the area.

"We encourage employers to use the WorkKeys assessment as one of the tools to evaluate job seekers," Jensen said. "We tell them about the programs we have available that can assist them financially in training the right job applicant for their position."

The program has a variety of benefits that make hiring new employees an efficient and cost-effective process for employers throughout Northeast Pennsylvania.

"The WorkKeys assessment enables employers to determine if a job applicant possesses the aptitude to perform the job duties for the position they have available," Jensen said. "Hiring a new employee is a lengthy and costly endeavor. It is important that the individual hired has the skills, or the aptitude to develop the skills, that are needed for the position. The WorkKeys assessment can assist an employer in making this determination."

Jensen added that programs are available to help fill in any gaps between the skills job seekers have and those they may need to possess.

"We do have training available in some cases to assist job seekers in improving their skills. Remediation has been successful in reducing skills gaps, as has classroom training. The CareerLink staff also provides guidance to job seekers about where there are needs within the manufacturing industry. We want them preparing for jobs that exist and not those that have no openings," she said.

Bimbo Bakeries USA, which operates plants in Valmont Industrial Park and Humboldt Industrial Park in Hazleton, has had great success finding qualified employees that have used CareerLink resources like the WorkKeys program.

"We have found a very high-quality workforce dedicated to maintaining a safe work environment and producing quality products," a human resources manager said.
In business, there are secrets. One of them is where to locate.

We’ve interviewed leaders of the most successful food processing facilities in our industrial parks and told their stories in one convenient place... our new blog, www.wecandofood.com.