

Workforce Development Using the Work Keys System

Searching for a common language

By Gerald Bartlett, Vice President Marketing & Workforce Development

The alignment of education and training with current and future workforce requirements begins with a clear understanding of the specific skills and skill levels required for workplace success.

The Bay Area Industry Education Council (IEC) has been working to engage industry sectors in workforce development by helping them create regional workforce development plans based on the identification of skills necessary to perform jobs in the cluster.

Industry sectors are also encouraged to begin working with high schools and community colleges to help advise curriculum and training, to bring current industry information on trends and skills to the planning table, and to provide work-based learning opportunities for students, and professional development activities for faculty such as industry tours and fellowships.



Tracy hung up the phone and let out a deep breath. It had been tough trying to explain to the high school counselor, the basic skills she was looking for in the Public Relations Summer student intern position she had just gotten the OK to create. Tracy knew intuitively what skills she would need from the applicants, and she understood that these would be high school students with perhaps little experience. But somehow she could not make clear to the counselor the exact skills and skill levels she wanted. If only there was an easier way to describe what she was looking for. In the end, the counselor guessed that Tracy was probably looking for a Junior or Senior, strong in English or Journalism, and he started making a list of students that might fit the bill.

Salvador tried this way and that to explain to the HR Manager just how qualified his trainee was for the job the manager had just

posted with Salvador's training center. "Margaret has excellent interpersonal skills. She is great with numbers. She can read and research information very well, and she follows instructions to the letter," Salvador urgently explained.

But the HR Manager probed further. "Yes, but how well does she read? And, are her math skills good enough to work for us," he asked?

"Well, she reads maybe at the high school level," Salvador explained, "and does pretty complicated math problems."

The conversation continued like this for a while with Salvador trying patiently to paint a picture of his qualified applicant, and the HR Manager struggling to gain a clear sense of just how skilled she really was, and how much more training she would need once hired.



These are just two examples of the daily challenge employers, trainers, educators, and students and trainees face when trying to discuss job skills and qualifications.

Unfortunately, the skill requirements described by one person do not always mean the same thing to another. And, employers who say, "We need Reading, and Math skills," don't always have a clear way to explain what level of Reading or what kind of Math that means.

Although relatively new on the California scene, ACT's (formerly American College Testing) occupational profiling and skills certification system called Work Keys, has been enjoying increasing popularity among industry and education leaders around the Nation as a common language that everyone can understand.

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The system works with eight core competencies: *Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, Listening, Writing, Teamwork, Applied Technology, Locating Information, and Observation*. It provides the means to identify core skills in virtually any occupation, measure those skills, and then describe, in plain language, what an individual scoring a level 5 in Applied Mathematics, for example, knows and is able to perform at that level.

The Work Keys system has been a boon to local education and training professionals because it takes away the guesswork of what skills and skill levels are required for various jobs, and provides individuals, through the Work Keys individual assessments, the means to “certify” the skills they have. It also provides value as a tool in career planning.

Mapping occupations by profiling jobs within a career cluster – beginning with entry level jobs, continuing with mid range jobs, and finally profiling higher skill jobs – leads to a clear understanding of the progression of skill development needed to move up the career ladder. High Schools, Community Colleges, and Community Based Training Agencies benefit from this information because students and clients can see, incrementally, what skills they will need to develop to access better jobs.

“Once a Work Keys occupational profile is completed for a particular job or occupation, we can provide the resulting information about skills and skill levels necessary for successful job performance to local high schools, community colleges, and community based training agencies for integration into their curriculum and training programs,” explains Gerald Bartlett, Vice President for Workforce Development at the Bay Area Industry Education Council (IEC).

In an upcoming project sponsored by the Alameda County Department of Social Services, the Work Keys system will assist Private Industry Council training centers and job placement agencies in matching applicants with jobs. Commonly filled jobs in seven key occupational areas will be profiled to gain a clear picture of the skills and skill levels applicants will need to perform successfully on the job. Training centers will have access to the occupational profile data and can integrate it into training curricula, to better prepare their clients for successful job placement. Using the Work Keys assessment tool, clients can be assessed to see how closely their skills match with those required by the job.



Work Keys provides a common language that industry and education both understand. Using the Work Keys system, Human Resources professionals like Tracy can spell out clearly the skills and skill levels they are looking for in interns and a job applicants. And, Salvador can describe Margaret’s skills to the HR Manager using a commonly understood metric that quantifies Margaret’s skills and skill levels, and compares them to the HR Manager’s occupational profile of the job he is trying to fill.

For more information on Work Keys, please call Gerald Bartlett at the Bay Area Industry Education Council at 510/795-6171.

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