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Address the state's workforce paradox

By Paul Jadin And Reggie Newson

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Wisconsin faces a workforce paradox. Several sectors in Wisconsin, mainly manufacturing, are having difficulty filling jobs because applicants lack necessary skills. Yet the state has an unemployment rate of 7.3%. There are good, family-supporting jobs out there, but the state, our education system and employers need to collectively focus on matching the availability of our workforce with those job needs.

It's this paradox that Gov. Scott Walker and Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch are aggressively working to address. The issue won't be solved overnight or on any one front. It's a matter of laying the groundwork for our education system, businesses and workforce development to work together to address the gap between experience and available job opportunities. Our state must make it a priority to educate our workforce and dispel myths about Wisconsin's economy in the following ways:

Our K-12 system, along with parents, needs to do a better job of highlighting manufacturing as a desirable career pathway after high school and dispelling false impressions that manufacturing is dirty, dumb and dangerous.

We have to introduce students at the elementary, middle school and high school levels to the reality that advanced manufacturing is part of Wisconsin's new economy and that the industry offers high-tech, immediately available positions with family-supporting wages to those with the right skill sets.

Our manufacturing plants need to engage students and young working adults through mentorship programs and other outreach. These employers can showcase their products and operations as well as illustrate their potential societal impact and the skills needed to drive their industries forward. Having been through workplaces over the years, we can guarantee that these tours leave an impression that will get young people excited about these careers.

We need to recognize that not everyone needs to go to a four-year college and that attractive, lifelong opportunities exist through technical training. All of our colleges need to develop curricula addressing workplace needs rather than just student demand. In addition, focusing technical training on certification, rather than a degree, makes us more nimble to respond to changes in workplace skill needs. We have one of the best technical college systems in the country. Working together, we can ensure their course offerings accurately reflect the workforce dynamic.

We need to identify regional job opportunities and skill needs and find ways to help people relocate to where those jobs are. Our businesses facing shortages need to throw a wider net for recruitment. We may have to look at assistance on training credits and relocation - connecting available workers with available jobs.

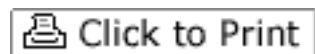
We must do a better job of identifying the skills, abilities and experience of people who are unemployed and link them to the available needs. A more thorough assessment of our workforce development strategy is necessary to transition from excelling at processing claims to excelling at putting people back to work.

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. and the Department of Workforce Development will partner in re-branding opportunities, aligning training to job needs, connecting workers to jobs and providing necessary training and relocation investments. We look forward to continuing to work with our workforce development partners, along with educators at every level of academia, to better position available workers to fill businesses' current needs.

Paul Jadin is chief executive of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. Reggie Newson is secretary of the state Department of Workforce Development.

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