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Tests match worker's skills with the employer's needs

By **KEVIN TURNER**,
The Times-Union

When Allen Smith applied for a job as a custodian at Shands Jacksonville last month, he didn't know the hospital would offer him a better job.

But Smith, 38, did so well in required skill testing, he was instead interviewed for - and landed - a job as a supervisor.

"It was exciting; a good feel-good experience," he said. "I've retained a lot of information in 20 years."

Smith benefited from the Florida Ready to Work Program, a 2-year-old statewide certificate program that many in Jacksonville might not know about.

Using standardized tests developed by ACT Inc., it quantifies a person's ability to do the kind of math, reading and information-getting tasks needed in the workplace into a three-digit score, each number measured on a scale of 0-9.

The ACT tests, called "WorkKeys," are also used to profile existing jobs, determining which of the three skills are needed to perform them. Those results also are listed as a three-number score measured on a scale of 0-9.

Most job scores are between a 3 and a 5.

Pamela McCaleb, director of Success Academy, the training department at Shands Jacksonville, said some applicants for the Shands custodial job were surprised to find the job requires math and reading skills.

"Hospitals have a lot of training that's required," and much of that is on computers, she said.

Florida Ready to Work-contracted profilers from the University of Florida gave the custodial job a 3-3-3 WorkKeys rating. But when Shands hiring officials saw Smith's WorkKeys score of 7-5-7, they interviewed him for a shift supervisor's job.

"We never would have found that out about him if it wasn't for WorkKeys," McCaleb said.

ACT spokeswoman Katie Wacker said that the company, best known for college placement tests, developed WorkKeys in response to employer comments that recent graduates didn't have basic workplace skills.

Since the 1990s, 32 states have implemented WorkKeys into employment programs either statewide or regionally, she said. In Michigan, every high school graduate has to take the ACT, WorkKeys tests, or both, she said. In Florida, high school students take either test voluntarily.

The Legislature allocated \$17.2 million in 2006 to launch Florida Ready to Work, administered by The Florida Department of Education and the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation. That money gave Florida residents access to WorkKeys testing free of charge and pays for course work for people seeking to improve their scores.

The program continues with \$13.9 million for fiscal year 2008-09, according to the Department of Education.

A three-number score, the lowest digit of which is a 3, qualifies for a "bronze" certificate; a 4 for "silver" and a 5 for "gold."

But certifying high school seniors, unemployed people seeking work and career-changers isn't the only component to the program. It can't function unless employers recognize the value of the ratings.

"Business is hungry for it. They just don't know it yet," WorkSource spokeswoman Candace Moody said.

Northeast Florida Ready to Work project coordinator Valencia Strowder said she wants to make sure regional employers first recognize program certificates, then request them and finally require them of applicants.

"I'm trying to knock on every door of every business," she said.

For an employer to be able to know what skills are needed to do a job, representatives from the University of North Florida's Division of Continuing Education spend a day with people who do the job, assess the skills needed and create a three-number WorkKeys skill profile, UNF Dean Robert Wood said.

UNF's job profiling costs an employer \$1,000 to \$2,000 each, but state funds are still available to discount that cost, Wood said.

"It's a good way to match the employer's need and the employee's skills together," he said.

Putting a profiled test and tested applicant together makes for a good fit, Wacker said.

"Turnover [reduction] is the biggest benefit we have - we hear that again and again," she said.

ACT has profiled more than 15,000 jobs around the country, Wacker said, and UNF has profiled more than 150 statewide, Wood said. Profiles for an additional 168 jobs will be released soon, he said.

kevin.turner@jacksonville.com, (904) 359-4609 ACT Job Profiles Following are ACT WorkKey job profile excerpts for jobs in Jacksonville and nationwide. Each job title is followed by a set of three numbers, each

representing a score on a scale of 0-9. Most jobs require skills ranging from 3 to 5, although some require more. The first number represents the necessary qualifying score in applied math; the second in reading information and the third in locating information. JACKSONVILLE JOB PROFILES Job Title Necessary qualifying score Welder 3-5-4 Supervisor 4-4-6 Accounting assistant 3-5-3 Career customer consultant 4-5-5 Career consultant 4-5-5 Quality assurance technician 4-4-3 Sales associate 5-5-5 Sales manager 6-5-6 Analyst 5-5-5 Integrated career manager 6-4-6 Assembler 4-5-3 Machining operator 4-4-3 Source: University of North Florida Division of Continuing Education~~~Medal Winners Participation in the Florida Ready to Work individual testing program was uneven in Northeast Florida through July 30, with 231 people taking the standardized tests in Baker County but none reported in Nassau County. A total of 693 people in the region took the tests as of that date. County Bronze Silver Gold Baker 48 145 38 Clay 18 28 6 Duval 27 52 14 Putnam 5 28 3 St. Johns 15 56 37 Source: WorkSource Corporate Communications

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