



Worker certification program coming to Southwest Florida

By LAURA LAYDEN

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It's ready, set, go for a new state program that could change the way Florida businesses hire and train workers.

The \$17 million credentialing program, called Florida Ready to Work, isn't well known yet. But word is spreading in Southwest Florida.

On Wednesday at the Country Club of Naples off Solana Road, a group of about 50 local human resource managers heard all about it. The talk was organized by the trade group HR Collier.

"This is the first time in Southwest Florida that we are really presenting it to the business community," said Jim Wall, a quality improvement manager with the Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board Inc.

The board is overseeing the implementation of the program locally.

Any Florida resident can earn the Ready to Work credential, and there is no cost.

Here's how it works: Through testing, students and other job hunters can earn certificates that show they have the basic skills needed to succeed on the job. To get the certificates, they must score at least a three on required tests in three categories: math, reading and locating information.

Bronze, silver and gold certificates are awarded based on scores. For a gold, a tester must score a five on all three tests. It means they have the skills to do 90 percent of the jobs today.

"It's actually designed to help businesses and educators talk a common language," Wall said.

The certificates are signed by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist.

In Lee County, there are 17 centers offering assessments, he said. Most are located at high schools.

In Collier County, there soon will be an assessment center at the Career and Service Center off Radio Road. There are plans to set up others. But a change in administration at the Collier County School District has slowed the expansion of the program into schools in the Naples area, Wall said.

"The goal statewide is to have 100,000 students or job seekers assessed by the end of the school year," he said.

The program also offers profiling to businesses to help them determine the skills needed for certain jobs. That way employers will know immediately whether job seekers qualify for those jobs based on their Ready to Work assessments.

Also, businesses can use the profiling to determine what kind of training is needed for current workers who lack the skills they need to do their job, or to move up.

Though new to Florida, the Ready for Work program has been successful in other states, including North Carolina and Tennessee.

"It's a portable credential ... All over the country people are doing it," said Angela Tilton with the Worldwide Interactive Network, which has contracted with the state to offer Web-based job training and other support for the program.

In other states, the program has helped employers reduce turnover by anywhere from 20 to 33 percent, Wall said.

Wall called his presentation a call to action. He hopes many businesses will take advantage of the program, paid for with tax dollars.

"This is yours. There's absolutely no cost," he told the HR Collier group.

Jennifer Rains, a training specialist for window and door manufacturer PGT Industries, with offices in Venice on Florida's west coast and Salisbury, N.C., said her company already has had success with the program. After trying it in North Carolina first, it has been expanded to Florida.

In Florida, 31 of its employees have earned credentials. PGT is using the program as a tool to train its workers for advancement.

"We are making a big deal about it," Rains said. "We are recognizing employees who receive it."

After learning about the program, Maria Ramos, the human resource manager at Royal Poinciana Golf Club in Naples, left the meeting with plans to bring the idea to her general manager.

The golf club currently offers English classes to its non-native workers. The program could be enhanced to offer other training, she said.

"I think it's a great opportunity," Ramos said. "There are so many unskilled workers in our area."

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