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Program gives job seekers competitive edge

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BRADENTON — Nicholas Stokes sat in a computer laboratory at Manatee Technical Institute on Wednesday, one that many students — and the public — are visiting these days.

Stokes, like many job seekers, is working to earn a credential in Florida Ready to Work, a free career-readiness program funded by the state.

With an 8.7 percent unemployment rate in Manatee County, there are 13,305 people job hunting.

Many of these people are finding they need to re-evaluate their job skills and learn how to market themselves to new industries.

“For those who have been laid off, the Ready to Work credential can show potential employers the skills that candidates have and to what degree,” said Tiffany Vause, project coordinator.

Job seekers use the program to earn a credential after passing tests in applied math, reading for information and locating information.

Ready to Work measures the level at which job seekers are skilled in the subjects. Each subject starts with a Level 3 assessment and reaches Levels 6-7. The level reached gives the employer an idea of how skilled a job seeker is in math, reading comprehension and locating information.

With thousands searching for jobs in Manatee County, Vause said the credential will keep job seekers competitive.

“It’s a great tool for employees in that it makes them more marketable on their job hunt,” Vause said. “When an employer sees that a potential employee has the credential, they know they are motivated, skilled workers because this program is voluntary. It shows they’ve put the time and effort in to proving themselves.”

Stokes hopes earning the credential will give him a better chance at getting at job.

“The economy is not too great right now and I really need a job, so every opportunity I can get is better than nothing,” he said.

More than 400 Ready to Work credentials have been issued in Manatee County with 700 credentials issued in Sarasota County since the Florida Department of Education began administering the program in spring 2007.

Ready to Work was approved by the Florida Legislature in 2006 and the state funds the program annually to keep it free for businesses, employees and job seekers.

The Anna Maria Oyster Bar has used the program to find and hire high school job candidates who have earned the Ready to Work program credential.

“When someone comes in and says they have (the credential), it gives them a leg up,” said John Horne, co-owner of Anna Maria Oyster Bar.

“They’ve shown that they’ve taken the initiative and they want to work and want to learn how to work.”

Stokes hopes to make the same impression on employers by completing the Ready to Work program in addition to his technical trade certificate in barbering.

“If they see what I’m capable of I’ll have a better opportunity to just one-up the next person,” Stokes said.

MTI, which serves as one of the main testing centers in Manatee County, has administered 1,950 tests at its Bradenton campus and 750 at its Lakewood Ranch campus since it started, said Maura Howl, an administrator for MTI.

Florida Ready to Work has 106 employers in the Southwest Florida district.

Due to the economy, however, several employer partners in Manatee County haven't had the opportunity to use the program to screen for employees who have a credential through Ready to Work.

"We're not out there looking for new employees right now," said Trudy Moon, co-owner of Air & Energy Air Conditioning in Holmes Beach. "When we're ready, we'll be looking for that on the credential, on the application. It shows initiative, it shows an employee who has taken this extra step. When we have a correction in the market I think this will be good to have."

Dieter Sod Service in Bradenton, also a Ready to Work employer partner, has yet to use the program.

However, human resources manager Linda Brown said the program will speed up the process in finding qualified candidates when the company is ready to hire.

"It looks to me like a program that would really cut down on the extra work in going through all the resumes and referral phone calls," Brown said. "This will give me a better idea of what a person's potential skill level is. A skill level is difficult to get over the phone from former employers."

Despite many companies in the state being in a hiring freeze or downsizing, Florida Ready to Work officials are working to recruit more businesses to become employer partners.

Vause said businesses can still benefit from the program by utilizing it to send their employees for further assessments and training them in math, reading comprehension and locating information.

"The program is free, so there's no monetary commitment for any business," Vause said. "We are continuing to reach out to business so they can explore the opportunities available with the own employees. Regardless of the economy it's still a great training tool."