Finger Lakes WIB Transformation and Integration of Workforce and Economic Development

By Sharon Sewell and Robyn Domber

Highly skilled and well-educated labor is an essential element of an innovative, knowledge-based economy. Industries depend on workers with knowledge, skills, and abilities for sustainability and growth. Therefore, communities must have the capacity to produce a workforce with the skills their employers need if they are to thrive in the global economy. Driven by the rapidly changing, highly competitive global marketplace that puts a premium on skilled and educated workers in the face of a steady decline in financial resources, communities are implementing strategies to better integrate workforce and economic development activities.

Concerned about their region’s ability to compete in a knowledge-based global economy, workforce-board leaders are working more closely with economic development partners, education professionals, and employers to ensure that their programs and job placement efforts are designed to meet the current and future needs of regional industries – especially those that are key to future economic growth.

The Finger Lakes Workforce Board Inc. (FLWIB, Inc.) located in Geneva, New York, recognized early the importance of collaborating with their economic development partners to address the economic well-being of their citizens, industry needs, and the economic growth of their region. In 2001, FLWIB, Inc. embarked on a transformation process to better position the organization and the community to meet the needs of its citizens and employers and to respond to the demands of the global economy. This transformation and alignment is generating positive results for the Finger Lakes region.

FLWIB, Inc began as an organization responsible for workforce development policies and programs in a geographic region encompassing Ontario, Seneca, Wayne, and Yates counties. With its incorporation as a 501(c)3 in 2002, FLWIB Inc.'s role expanded from just overseeing their One-Stop centers and programs to becoming a policy board that focused on strategic priorities and partnerships that support the continuous development of a highly skilled, flexible, and adaptable workforce.

Michael Manikowski (Executive Director of Ontario County Office of Economic Development and Chair of New York State Economic Development Council) asserts that one of the most valuable steps taken by the WIB in the transformation and alignment process was inviting economic development partners, business leaders, and other key stakeholders to participate in a series of strategic planning sessions. Nationally recognized futurists and economists were brought in to identify market trends and best practices in the global economy. Involvement in strategic planning led the group to recognize the shift in economic development from a real estate based model to one of technology based economic development. They also realized the importance of workforce development in improving economic growth and achieving sustainable development. Furthermore, strategic planning raised the group’s awareness of the role workforce can play in making education more responsive to economic needs.

To achieve greater alignment, the WIB, regional economic development organizations, and other partners are currently pursuing sector- or cluster-based strategies to address the needs of their region’s industries. Karen Springmeier, Executive Director of FLWIB Inc., reports that cluster-based strategies have become innovative...
approaches to workforce development as all businesses experience the retirement of baby boomers and the lack of talent-pipeline development to meet their needs. “From an economic development perspective, the Cluster strategy will promote more “business to business” activity within the region”, Manikowski explains. Cluster-based strategies refer to a variety of initiatives that focus on improving the competitiveness of a particular economic sector. Seven industry clusters are being targeted by FLWIB Inc., and its partners – Advanced Manufacturing, Information Technology, Health Care, New Sciences, Skilled Trades, Agriculture/Food and Tourism/Retail.

FLWIB, Inc. has initiated two strong cluster networks with the Finger Lakes Advanced Manufacturers Enterprise (FAME) and the Health and Human Service clusters. Information Technology will be the next cluster to be launched as part of the transformation strategy to manage and improve the region’s talent pipeline. “In building a cluster-based approach, we will be able to bring responsible parties together to create new, energizing solutions to make Finger Lakes a vibrant region,” Springmeier explains.

Other key initiatives that support the transformation platform include: the creation of two research parks to foster innovation and entrepreneurism in the Finger Lakes region; construction of a new campus satellite in preparation for the development of a high-tech corridor; and establishment of a revolving loan fund by the EDA to help local business address their workforce needs. The group also invested $200,000 for training at area colleges to assist with producing a skilled workforce. Coincidently, the region boasts an 88 % retention rate for area graduates.

All these strategies and tactics helped to align the everyday activities of workforce and economic development officials, One-Stop career center staff, community college and university leaders, business leaders, and other key stakeholders. The result is an improved workforce-delivery system that responds to industry needs and increases the knowledge and skills of the future and current workforce in ways that are relevant to short- and long-term economic needs and priorities.

Other positive outcomes include: two Finger Lakes WIRED grants for an Educator Internship Program and a Start Here for a High Tech Career Program and for expansion of the Finger Lakes Advanced Manufacturers Enterprise Initiative; a New York State Department of Transportation award for the Finger Lakes Works with their Hands Career Awareness Fair; a New York State Department of Labor award for an Internship Program; legislative items from Assemblyman Kolb and Senator Nozzolio and funding from Ontario, Wayne and Seneca Industrial Development Agencies.

Karen Springmeier and Michael Manikowski credit the success of the transformation and alignment of workforce and economic development activities in their region with the following key factors:

- strong/passionate leadership;
- close relationship between the WIB Director and EDA President;
- committed partners engaged down to the committee level;
- policy platforms fully supported by chief elected officials and County Administrators;
- clear direction from County Administrators; benchmarking initiatives with other regions and countries around the globe;
- and tremendous collaboration among key stakeholders.

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