

OPINION

On-the-job training a win-win for employers, disabled

By JUDY NEAL

It is well established that a skilled worker shortage exists in Lane County. On-the-job training for people with disabilities could help address this shortage.

In a survey conducted by the Lane Workforce Partnership, 68 percent of Lane County manufacturers reported a lack of skilled production workers to fill openings. The report noted that skilled worker shortages have significantly affected businesses and economic development, as well as lowered production.

In her article titled "Oregon's Employment Experts Identify Hard-to-fill Positions" published in Oregon Employment Department's Labor Market Information System on March 29, 2006, Patti Curry noted that Willamette Valley employers who listed openings with the Oregon Employment Department had trouble filling construction-related trades, truck driving and health care positions.

There is obviously a problem to be addressed, but what is the answer?

The Lane Workforce Partnership's 2006 State of the Workforce Report listed work shortage projections for industries in Lane County, and those provide some insights.

Under each industry or work group, positions were listed along with the minimum education needed to obtain each job. In many instances, on-the-job training would provide adequate preparation for such occupations as 11 positions in health care, 17 of 22 positions in the transportation or equipment manufacturing field, and eight of 27 positions in software and computer system design.

Could an on-the-job training program be an answer to the skilled work shortage? In my experience, such training can be a win-win situation for the employer and the prospective employee. It provides employees an opportunity to learn by doing, and while earning money. It can help ascertain whether this is a good job match for both parties.

On-the-job training is an important way in which people acquire relevant knowledge and skills at the work site. It is often a preferred method of learning, because it can be adapted to the learning style of the trainee.

The Oregon State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services offers on-the-job training to employers as a

way to help its clients become employed. The office works with people who have a disability that is a barrier to employment. On-the-job training plans can reimburse employers 25 percent to 50 percent of trainee wages for a period of three to six months.

Disability World writes that currently, only 29 percent of working age people with disabilities in the United States are employed. It also states that of those not working, 72 percent want to work.

When Congress enacted the Americans With Disabilities Act 16 years ago, supporters hoped it would increase disabled peoples' opportunities for employment. According to researchers at Cornell University, the employment rate for people with disabilities peaked at about 25 percent in the 1990s before dropping below 20 percent by 2004.

Employers often have misconceptions regarding people with disabilities. On-the-job training can assist by providing a cost-effective way to try out a prospective employee.

Employers also may have concerns about hiring people with disabilities due to perceptions that they might require extra attention, special assistance or have trouble fitting in or getting along with co-workers. Surveys conducted by DuPont Corp. show that employees with disabilities have lower turnover rates, less absenteeism and higher productivity. Successive studies at DuPont consistently found that their managers rated 90 percent of employees with disabilities average or better in job performance.

OVRs has been very successful in assisting disabled people become employed through on-the-job training, as well as other employment plans. For example, for the 2004 federal fiscal year in Lane County, 333 clients gained employment, creating a total estimated earnings of nearly \$4.2 million. On-the-job training is a wonderful vehicle to gainful employment that benefits employers, prospective employees and Lane County.

Judy Neal is a rehabilitation counselor for the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services has offices in Cottage Grove, Eugene, Florence and Springfield. This is the ninth in a bi-weekly series of articles about developing Lane County's work force.