

Soft Skills at Work: New Maryland Workforce Corp. looks at worker skills

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"But, what are we going to do about soft skills?"

That was the question employers asked repeatedly at the February 2008 Governor's Workforce Summit I attended. It was a time when businesspeople were concerned about baby boomers retiring. As a result they wondered, "Will there be enough qualified workers?"

Then the economic crisis hit, layoffs occurred, and conversations about soft skills slowed. However, this is not to say that concern about them abated.

"People do talk and complain about soft skills," said Andy Moser, president of the Maryland Workforce Corp. located in Millersville. "But there isn't systemic change."

It is that lack of change that prompted me to talk with Andy about his views when I visited his office to learn about the newly formed group.

This is a quasi-public corporation (<http://www.theworkforcecorp.org/>) established by law in July 2009 with its first board meeting one year ago. The corporation works with a variety of partner agencies such as the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, the Department of Business and Economic Development, the Maryland Higher Education Commission and others to develop and administer several workforce development related projects that benefit the entire state at a fast speed.

Unlike state government, Maryland Workforce can receive grants from foundations, and it coordinates private and public funding.

Andy told me that 77 percent of jobs will require some sort of post-high school to four-year degree, which includes apprenticeship programs. Maryland Workforce is working on projects to accelerate the time it takes to get a credential and then a job. That is the goal of one called MIBEST (Maryland Integrated Basic Education Skills Training) made possible through a combination of private and public funding. This program helps students and adults learn literacy and workplace skills.

I asked Andy what role soft skills plays in their projects. He relayed that most of the grants do not focus on soft skills but when the economy recovers, emphasis will be back. However, employers have also believed that many of the workers who have been laid off already have soft skills.

"But do they?" Andy said. "How many don't know about a new corporate culture and how to adapt well?" Those comments sparked an interesting conversation about the state of interpersonal and communication skills, particularly with the rise in texting. Andy observed that some recent graduates entering the workplace are "petrified" that they actually have to talk to somebody. They are at ease with texting but don't realize there can be a downside.

"When talking with a person face-to-face, you can see the reaction," Andy said. "But with e-mails or texting, you can find yourself greatly misunderstood. If you tell a joke, they can't see you smiling."

While Andy believes all forms of communication, like texting, have a role, people should not totally eliminate others, such as face-to-face interactions.

"It would be a shame if that were a lost art," Andy noted about in-person conversations. Questions he would ask people to consider are, "What are your communication skills? Can you talk to somebody or do you have to text?"

We then expanded our discussion to include all electronic media and why it is crucial to be careful when using it.

"Any time you send an e-mail, it can go anywhere and exist in perpetuity," Andy said. "And respect what you put on Facebook. You don't have control of it anymore. People are going to use whatever you put up. Don't put on Facebook what you wouldn't want to see on the front page of a newspaper."

While we talked primarily about communication skills, Andy had advice about the importance of interpersonal skills in general.

"No matter where you are or what you do, from day one the way you respond to people builds your reputation," he said. "There is no such thing as, 'when I get to the next level I'll start being nice.' "

Our conversation brought to light why soft skills need to be emphasized; it is because they are essential for people to be successful. Andy captured that thought when he said, "Soft skills combined with ability is probably a winning combination."

CONNECT! Coalition

CONNECT! partner The Parenting Center at Anne Arundel Community College has created a workshop, "Teaching Children to Love," to help students develop self-management and self-awareness skills to achieve success in school and life. Taught by Beth Hadley and Cheryl Townshend with the TEACH Institute at AACC, this workshop was first presented in November at the Parent Involvement Conference as a partnership between AACC and the Anne Arundel County Public Schools. This course, which focuses on cultivating the feeling of appreciation and care toward others and whose principles come from the Institute of Heartmath, will be available for students through The Parenting Center this summer (www.aacc.edu/parenting).

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