Investing In Talent: Recruiting And Training Future Transportation Professionals

A recent U.S. Department of Transportation blog post stated that the nation’s transportation systems were fast approaching a “demographic cliff.” Others have referred to a “silver tsunami,” a perfect storm of Baby Boomer retirements along with an alarming lack of skilled professionals to assume those critical transportation occupations. In this perfect-storm scenario, transportation jobs remain unfilled, the movement of people and goods grows more inefficient, companies lose revenue, and the national economy suffers. To prevent that scenario, thought leaders in transportation and education must develop innovative ways to bridge the gap between the skills job seekers bring and skills that employers need.

According to a joint report from the U.S. Departments of Transportation, Labor, and Education, transportation employers will need to hire “4.6 million workers—1.2 times the current transportation workforce—in the next decade, due to the industry’s employment needs that will result from growth, retirements, and turnover.”

Transportation employers across all sectors are increasingly responding to these workforce challenges by investing more time and resources into developing skilled transportation professionals. Major supply chain employers are now developing nontraditional apprentice programs to create their own minor leagues of talented professionals after realizing that such efforts are more sustainable than poaching employees from competing firms.

Apprenticeships are most commonly associated with training programs for union workers. But there is a growing trend in private-sector firms to develop non-union apprentice programs to bridge the skills gap between classrooms and workplaces. Investing in apprenticeships can save organizations recruitment and training costs, given that employees can be more accurately placed in positions that match the knowledge and skills gained in the apprenticeship. As a result, these programs help employers to reduce skills gaps. In an Urban Institute study consisting of 900 organizations with apprenticeship programs, approximately 90% of organizations reported they would highly recommend apprenticeship programs to others, because the programs helped meet skill demands and reduce gaps.

The emergence of nontraditional apprentice programs is part of a larger trend toward more workplace-learning initiatives formed through employer-educator partnerships. It is commonly observed that K-12 and postsecondary education fails to prepare students for the workplace by emphasizing individualized work and abstract theoretical knowledge over workplace competencies and multi-disciplinary understanding. The modern work environment calls for workers who have in-depth knowledge of their discipline, but a breadth of knowledge in regard to how their field intersects with others.

In response to those challenges, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) recently launched the Talent Pipeline Management Academy to engage employers and their educational partners to close the skills gap. USCCF developed its academy by applying lessons learned from innovations in supply chain management to develop a call for employers to “play a new and expanded leadership role as ‘end-customers’ of education and workforce partnerships.”

Robert G. Sheets, Research Professor at the George Washington Institute of Public Policy, and Jason A. Tyszko, Senior Director for Education and Workforce at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, describe such employer-educator partnerships as a new approach to developing “innovation talent” at all levels of the workforce.

It seems the days of laissez-faire hiring strategies are long past for employers seeking sustainable workforces. It is no longer sufficient to post a job description on monster.com or indeed.com and passively wait for talented applicants. Savvy employers understand that investment in employee talent pipelines and employer-educator partnerships is a key to long-term viability.

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