

Task force identifies four areas of high need in workforce development

Traditional pipelines for delivering skilled workers aren't keeping up with industry needs, and families aren't adapting to new market trends.

Technological innovations are allowing many Idaho businesses to grow quickly, but they are also creating fierce competition for employees who have technical skills. Several businesses are hiring as fast as they can, but Idaho's schools can't accommodate the growth.

This has created a market with 30,000 unemployed residents looking for jobs, but 20,000 open positions — several of which can't be filled because available candidates don't have the right qualifications.

This skills gap is expected to widen. The Idaho Department of Labor predicts that by 2024 there will be 49,000 vacant positions across Idaho.

"The days where you could say 'I graduated from high school and have a strong back and a shovel and am therefore employable,' are gone," said Trent Clark, public and government affairs director at Monsanto.

A governor-assigned task force of industry leaders and state agents is investigating Idaho's workforce issue this year in order to provide the governor with recommendations on how to improve it before the 2018 Legislature. The group has five more meetings scheduled this year, with the next one April 24. The group has chosen four areas for improvement: business and education partnerships, career advising, funding and marketing.

Business and education partnerships

Even though businesses are the ones pushing Idaho to improve its talent pipelines, the role of business in shaping policy around education is hazy.

There are several successful partnerships between businesses, colleges and the Department of Labor, but most of these arrangements happen individually without regard for building sustainable talent pipelines for the state, said Jessica Beaver-Nelson, senior research analyst at the Idaho Department of Labor.

"Right now everyone's arrows are pointed in different directions," she said. "We need to tweak them so we have one big arrow pointing in one direction."

Various Idaho programs help companies teach employees needed skills. The state is working on a program that helps companies create and manage apprenticeships in order to address some workforce shortage needs. But businesses aren't always willing participants in such programs, especially when it comes to paying for them, Clark said.

“It’s a question of where do you get the best bang for your buck,” he said. “There are times Monsanto feels that it would be better served spending its money on its own solutions. What is often missing is a compelling case of why this money is needed at the state level.”

The task force has invited several businesses from Idaho’s technology, agriculture, manufacturing and other important industries to share ideas of the type of partnerships that would benefit them. During the next few months, the task force will decide what partnerships to prioritize.

Career Advising

Another goal of the task force is creating a better career advising system for students.

Idaho schools don’t have the means to teach students about the many different paths they can take to career success. Many rural districts only have one career counselor, and several larger school districts have so few counselors that students never receive any face-to-face counseling. The ones who do hear mostly about four-year college programs.

The result: Some students think there are only two paths to take — going to college or taking a job straight out of high school. This mindset is especially prevalent in rural areas dominated by one industry.

But changing market demands and the advancement of technology are cutting the number of jobs available to high school graduates, even in agriculture and natural resources, said Alan Millar, executive director of the Idaho Pathways to Early Career High School Network.

“The type of jobs our rural areas have relied on aren’t there,” he said. “The mines and timber jobs that used to have crews of 30 individuals now have crews of three and they are higher skilled positions.”

The task force is discussing ways to put more counselors in schools and to train counselors to talk about all options, including professional certifications and associate degrees. Schools should give counselors more time with students instead of bogging them down with duties that keep them behind a desk, said Lori Lodge, public policy and legislation chairwoman of the Idaho School Counselors Association.

Students would ideally be taught what it will take if they want to be employable within the industries their families have worked in for generations, said CD Breshears, counselor support coordinator at the Idaho State Department of Education.

“Trailers will soon drive themselves and plants will be planted for us,” he said. “How do you get the kid who has their eye set on an industry to understand they can still work in an area they love while doing something Idaho needs of them.”

Funding

Idaho offers many alternatives to four-year degrees, such as career technical programs, but many are full.

“Several of the programs we are talking about are at capacity,” said Staci Low, administrator of West Ada School District’s Professional and Technical Education program. “Right now we tell students to come back because there might be room next year, but we lose a lot of those students to other states and many more just don’t come back.”

There isn’t an easy place to turn to for more money. The state already funds several programs and won’t be eager to fund more without promises that doing so will result in good job placements, said Rep. Rick Youngblood, R-Nampa.

“Things like wildfires are certainties so their funds always get funded, but workforce development doesn’t provide that kind of certainty,” Youngblood said. “When career development programs can come and say we need \$5 million and it will go here and will accomplish this, we fund those programs.”

Businesses — the other option for funding — aren’t likely to give more money to workforce development programs without the same assurances. So the task force is looking for ways to better use the more than \$160 million already going to workforce development programs.

The task force will use its remaining meetings to decide if the metrics used to measure each program can be standardized to more easily compare them.

Money could then be shuffled between programs in order to increase the capacity of the most successful ones, said Scott Rasmussen, dean of Idaho State University’s College of Technology.

“We would love to be more responsive with the programs we offer,” he said. “We have loads of programs with 100 percent placement rates that we would expand if we can just get more funding for them.”

Another area that needs to be addressed is how long it takes for workforce development programs to receive funding. Many programs aren’t responsive enough to the needs of businesses because it takes more than a year to shift funds between classes, said Dwight Johnson, state administrator of Idaho Professional-Technical Education.

“One of the problems we have with career technical education, all education funding really, is there is an 18-month delay,” Johnson said. “I have to get funding requests to the Department of Education in the spring to get the proposal to the governor’s office by September to have the proposal to the Legislature by January so that we can get funding in June. That isn’t responsive enough to the needs of employers — the funds don’t move fast enough.”

Image

The task force is also tackling students’ and families’ career perceptions. Social pressures strongly encourage students to obtain a four-year degree. Other programs often get less respect from students and parents,

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Idaho Business Review
Boise, Idaho
Wednesday April 19, 2017
by Benton Alexander Smith
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Johnson said. Career-technical jobs can be seen as dirty or low-paying. As a result, families don't encourage children to enter fields such as welding and machining.

"We suffer from a legacy mentality that says if you can't cut it academically we will send you to a trade school and that is somehow lesser," Johnson said. "That isn't in alignment with the high-skill, high-wage jobs we have open around the state."

The task force will look at ways to help the Department of Labor and Boise State University to create a career advising app for students.

"I've had three children go through the public school system, and my first exposure to some of these programs was today," Brian Whitlock, president of the Idaho Hospital Association, said at a task force meetings. "I would have liked to have known about these and gone through them with my son."

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