

Developing a Work Ready Workforce: Closing the Gap, Creating the Path

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Introduction

Tennessee employers are facing what is becoming a nationwide issue with a workforce that is lacking soft skills. The Collins English Dictionary defines the term "soft skills" as "desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude." From an economic development standpoint, the workforce is a high priority and possibly the top concern for recruiting and retaining business and industry for a community. While a degree or certification may be a requirement to fill a position, an employee lacking soft skills will be unable to succeed. A recent poll conducted by Adecco showed that 44% of the 500 U.S. senior executives surveyed believe that Americans lack soft skills and 30% see the manufacturing industry as the most affected by the skills gap. Local business leaders and industry managers agree that the lack of soft skills is producing a workforce that requires additional training at the expense of their organizations.

In 2016 and 2017, the White House Area Chamber of Commerce partnered with White House High School and business leaders to implement a six-week soft skills program aimed at bridging some of the gaps local industries reported. The program was conducted twice, once in the fall semester of 2016 and again in the spring of 2017, and nineteen students completed the program. Upon review of the program with the educators, business leaders and chamber of commerce, it was determined that the need for training should extend into the early grades.

Background

White House, Tennessee is located in middle Tennessee approximately 20 miles north of Nashville, Tennessee. According to a special census conducted in 2016, White House, Tennessee has 11,388 residents with an additional three to four thousand in the immediate trade area. White

House is split virtually down the middle by the county line that places the majority of White House businesses in Robertson County while the majority of homes and residents are located in Sumner County.

With the county divide, there are two school systems in the community each with elementary, middle, and high schools. In addition to the public-school systems, there are two private K-12 schools in the community. City leaders and the White House Area Chamber of Commerce are fortunate to have good working relationships with each of the schools, the administrators, and their county directors. Both schools have varied Career Technical Education (CTE) programs that involve local businesses and have an advisory board on which the chamber president serves.

The White House Area Chamber of Commerce serves approximately 340 members. The chamber provides traditional networking, marketing and educational opportunities to their business members. In addition to traditional chamber of commerce services, the chamber works closely with the City of White House on economic development, business retention, and community livability.

Relevant Course Work

The Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion Course conducted by Laith Wardi, CEcD provides a foundation for the workforce issues facing employers. His class addressed the shortage of talent at all levels in the workforce and reinforced that a student who starts behind will likely have disadvantages that persist as they move through school and last into their entire adult lives. He provided further information from the State of Tennessee stating that “on average, over 80% of job generation across the state is created by existing companies.” This information demonstrated the importance of a local, skilled workforce.

As suggested in the Tennessee Marketing and Attraction course, the Chamber regularly visits businesses and industries to identify concerns, address shortfalls, and celebrate achievements. Overwhelmingly the top concern from all those visited, from small shop owners to large industries, was the soft skills gap in young employees. At first, the problem appeared to be large and encompasses too many possibilities for a small Chamber to address. In the same Tennessee Marketing and Attraction course, Mike Philpot encouraged participants to “think globally and act locally.” The Chamber decided that every year that passes waiting for the perfect program to be developed produces thousands of potentially under-skilled employees entering the workforce in the White House area. It is time to act locally.

Description of the Project

In developing the Work Ready Workforce program, the goal is to reach students in each phase of their educational career beginning with an introduction to soft skills and higher education opportunities in elementary school. This too will be the time to introduce parents to Tennessee Promise and other programs in place to provide students the ability to gain higher education.

In middle school, the goal will be to reinforce some of the soft skills introduced in elementary school and focus on their high school path by discussing CTE options, participating in business/industry fairs, and career exploration. Emphasis will be placed again on the state programs available to all students to attain secondary education.

The high school instruction will be more intensive with a program geared to address several of the top skill deficits, prepare students to create resumes, participate in and conduct mock interviews, and make business/industry site visits. High school students that are participating in the Work Ready Workforce program will also be recruited as instructors and

advisors in the lower grade activities. Younger students will be able to see the program in action and build a relationship with an older student. By participating in the instruction and activities in the elementary and middle school curriculums, students will benefit by putting their newly acquired skills into action.

Upon completion of the high school program, students will receive a Work Ready Certificate that will guarantee them an interview with a variety of businesses in the White House area. At present six local businesses have agreed to guarantee an interview to graduates of the program, the chamber plans to recruit additional businesses with a goal of offering at least 20 interview opportunities as students prepare to enter the workforce.

At present the program consists of the following advisors and partners:

- Administrators at White House High School in Sumner County
- CTE Coordinator at White House High School
- Math and Business teacher at White House Middle School
- Guidance Counselor at H.B. Williams Elementary School
- HR Manager for Gateway Packaging
- HR Manager for the City of White House
- CEO at Tate Ornamental
- Media and Marketing Specialist
- Administrator at Life Christian Academy and former Director of Schools in Georgia
- The Board of Directors and staff for the White House Area Chamber of Commerce

Training and Funding

This program will be provided in the schools but will not be administered by teachers. Educators already face many obstacles and changing requirements, by providing volunteer instructors for the program's sessions, teachers will only be asked to provide classroom time and feedback on the program's impact on their students. In order for students to receive the full value and experience intended by this program, it is important to introduce business leaders and officials to conduct the program.

For elementary and middle school programming, in addition to business volunteers, high school students currently participating in the program will be utilized for teaching and reinforcing the program's objectives. As a grassroots effort, this program will seek to reach an entire grade level in elementary and middle school but will focus on select classes in high school with the goal of achieving grade level instruction as the program grows.

Initially, the White House Area Chamber of Commerce in partnership with local business and industry will provide the funds necessary for implementation of the program. As the program grows, other methods to secure funds may be explored, such as grants from state and federal programs, specific industry partnerships, and private contributions. If successful, the program could require the creation of a coordinator's position that would be able to oversee the project and introduce it into neighboring communities in Sumner and Robertson County.

Elementary School Program

The chamber will partner with a local non-profit, Community Initiative for the Arts, and a local printer to create and produce a comic book, Superhero Soft Skills, highlighting specific soft skills and why they are important. Included in the story will be exercises students can demonstrate at home and information on the Tennessee Promise program.

Superhero Soft Skills (designed for 3rd or 4th graders)

Objectives:

- The students will be able to demonstrate key soft skills: proper handshake, eye contact during a conversation, communication etiquette – please, thank you, correct salutations
- The students will be able identify CTE class options in high school and the careers attached to those classes. Students will also have a basic knowledge of Tennessee Promise.

Learning Activities:

- The instructor will present a brief description of key soft skills. High school students will demonstrate during instruction and then break into groups to practice their newly learned skills.
- The high school participants will give an overview of CTE classes available in the school system and discuss careers connected to those classes.
- The instructor will conclude the program with information on Tennessee Promise and conduct a soft skills speed round, inviting participation from the students to showcase their new skills.
- Upon completion of the class, students will be dubbed Soft Skills Superheroes, receive a copy of the comic book and a sticker for their participation. Students will be encouraged to share and practice their Superhero soft skills with their parents and classmates.

Middle School Program

The Tennessee P-16 Council is a public/private collaboration with Sumner, Robertson and Trousdale Counties that links all education levels from preschool through the senior year of college. The chamber is involved in this collaboration and partners with others on the P-16

Council for a Career Exploration Fair that is held in the spring at Volunteer State Community College for all eighth-grade students in the county. This career fair is the final element in the proposed middle school program with the other coursework designed to complement this event.

Skills Drill (designed for fall semester of 8th grade year)

Objectives:

- Strengthen student's soft skills: proper handshake, eye contact during a conversation, communication etiquette – please, thank you, correct salutations, and telephone communications.
- The students will be able to identify CTE class options in high school and the careers attached to those classes. Students will know about programs available for the attainment of technical certifications through TCAT and college opportunities associated with Tennessee Promise.

Learning Activities:

- The instructor will present a brief description of key soft skills. High school students will demonstrate during instruction and then break into groups to practice their newly learned skills.
- High School students and CTE teachers will introduce their programs and careers associated with each class.
- Instructor will introduce TCAT opportunities for dual enrollment in high school and technical certifications and discuss Tennessee Promise for college bound students.

Career Exploration Fair (spring semester of 8th grade year)

Objectives:

- The students will consider career choices and education paths before enrolling in high school classes.
- The knowledge attained participating in the CTE introduction in the fall and the career exploration fair in the spring will help students decide which classes to take in high school.

High School Program

The group of collaborators mentioned earlier, with the exception of the elementary guidance counselor and middle school teachers, were involved in the development of the high school portion of the project. Presenters are encouraged to develop their presentations using the following outline and objectives as a resource.

LESSON #1 Soft Skills/Professional Etiquette

Objectives:

- The students will be able to demonstrate “soft skills.”
- The students will be able to list the soft skills they currently possess.
- The students will identify soft skills which they can improve upon.
- The students will be able to demonstrate professional etiquette.

Learning Activities:

- The instructor will present the definition for Soft Skills - Desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge.
- The students will receive examples of soft skills.
 - Able to listen
 - Can accept feedback
 - Good communication skills

- Cooperative
- Helpful
- Critical thinker
- Dependable
- The students will make a list of the soft skills that they currently possess.
- The students will make a list of soft skills that they would like to possess and soft skills that they can improve upon.
- The instructor will demonstrate and define professional etiquette - Expected behaviors and expectations for individual actions within society, various groups, or a class. Within a place of business, it involves treating coworkers and the employer with respect and courtesy in a way that creates a pleasant work environment for everyone.
- The instructor and students will list examples of professional etiquette to include the following:
 - Arriving early and remaining the required time
 - The proper way to clock in and out
 - NON-use of cell phones
 - Respect for authority

LESSON #2 Networking/Social Media Dos and Don'ts/Human Resources

Objectives:

- The students will successfully demonstrate networking abilities by participating in role play situations with one another and course instructors.
- The students will be able to identify Social Media Dos and Don'ts for their personal accounts.

- The students will be able to research and identify employment opportunities

Learning Activities:

- The instructor will present the definition for networking and provide examples.
- The students will practice “networking” in small groups by exchanging mock business leads and referrals with fellow members.
- The students will name what they think are social media dos and don’ts while the teacher lists them on the board. They will then cooperatively form the definition, as the teacher expands upon social media dos and don’ts.
- The instructor will present the definition of human resources and explain the function of the department in the company.
- The students will then come up with ways to locate and access human resources.
- The students will research and obtain information on companies for which they would be interested in seeking employment.

LESSON #3 Resumes-How to get your resume noticed? Where do I look for a job?

Objectives:

- The students will create a resume using the skills acquired that will be reviewed by local HR professionals and receive feedback from their instructor.
- The students will identify at least one job opportunity and identify the steps necessary to achieve an interview: submit resume, complete job application, and draft a cover letter.

Learning Activities:

- The instructor will present the definition and components of a resume.
- The instructor will present ways to create a strong resume.

- The students will view sample resumes and identify which resumes are strong and which resumes are weak.
- The students will take the weaker resumes and make them stronger.
- The instructor will ask students to name places to look for a job while she creates a list on the board. She will then expound upon the list and provide additional resources for locating a job.

LESSON #4 Site Visit

Objectives:

- The students will gain firsthand knowledge of industries in the community.

Learning Activities:

- Plant manager, CEO, HR manager or similar will conduct a tour at their industry site.
 - Offer information on the application process and pay structure for varying positions within their company
 - Highlight various positions within their specific company
 - Provide information on technology and special skills that are needed for a successful hire with their organization

LESSON #5 Mock Interviews

Objectives:

- The students will participate in mock interviews conducted by the instructor and other volunteers to gain a better understanding of the interview process and build confidence.
- The students will receive feedback from their interview and participate in a feedback forum with instructors and other HR professionals that participated in the mock interview process.

Learning Activities:

- The instructor will give the students strategies to prepare for interviews.
 - Research on a company
 - Calming techniques to control nerves
 - Examples of appropriate dress for an interview
 - Preparation of sample questions
- The instructor will present the samples of the top interview questions.
 - What are your best qualities?
 - Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
 - Why should we hire you?
 - Why do you want to work here?
 - What are your goals?
- The instructor will also teach the students how to turn negative answers into positive ones. For example:
 - What is your biggest weakness?
 - “I keep busy and enjoy getting a lot done, but I’ve learned that I need to push myself to look for more efficient solutions and ensure that I delegate work to others to be as effective as possible.”
 - “I am creative and imaginative and enjoy new solutions to solve problems, but I’ve recognized new approaches may be less effective, and I can learn from others who have been successful before me.”
- The students will participate in mock interviews.

LESSON #6 Visit from the Mayor, presentation of Certificates

Creating Community Engagement and Support

Tracking the benefits of the program will be difficult in the early grades. The number of students completing the high school program and receiving their Work Ready Certificate will allow project organizers the ability to track the students through school and into the workforce with the cooperation of local businesses. Follow up sessions with employers offering the guaranteed interview will provide more information on the program's success or shortfalls.

The chamber will create an annual report noting the number of students reached in each grade level, the industries and businesses that participate in the program, and results of employer surveys participating in interviews. The report will be shared with educators, city and county officials as well as chamber stakeholders.

Stakeholders will be invited to participate in lesson six of the high school program. Attendees will have the opportunity to see the participants and volunteers involved in the program and to engage with the students about their experiences.

This project will be very fluid and require adjustments along the way as organizers work closely to provide an engaging program for students that will ultimately provide a more skilled workforce for employers. In order for the program to succeed, it will require a collaborative effort between educators, school officials, business and industry leaders, and the chamber of commerce.

Conclusion

Soft skills are much more than an industry buzz word but a foundation that is lacking in today's workforce. The Chamber of Commerce is charged with growing their community which includes a skilled labor pool for new and existing industry. A community lacking in workforce will be much like the student who starts behind, struggling to catch up and overcome the

disadvantage of a poorly trained workforce. By acting locally while thinking globally with a proactive approach and working with industry leaders, educators, and officials to create a skilled, equipped workforce will only enhance all of the community's assets and make them a more desirable place to do business.

Resource Material

Course material from the University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services

Economic Developer Program

- Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion Course
- Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course

Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_skills

Adecco USA. “Watch the Skills Gap.” January 26, 2018.

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U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts: White House, Tennessee

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/whitehousecitytennessee/PST045216>

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation Center for Education and Workforce. “Bridging the Soft Skills Gap.” November 6, 2017