

**Improving Hawkins County's Workforce by Becoming a
Certified ACT Work Ready Community**

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Introduction

Today's industry leaders routinely find it challenging to find a qualified workforce to fill open positions in their company. Unfortunately, studies show this seems to be the climate of the entire nation. There is a national skills gap problem and a supply and demand pipeline issue that must be addressed. It is increasingly becoming evident that a high school diploma or a college degree is not the only credential needed to succeed in the world. Depending on the specific job, a high school diploma or a college degree used to prepare our future leaders for the available job/career market. However, business and industry needs have changed. Business and industry management agree that soft skills and specialized training is the key to preparing the workforce of Hawkins County and to begin filling the gap in today's workforce. In 2016, Hawkins County Industrial Development Board began taking a look at their own workforce needs and collaboratively with Department of Education, Chamber of Commerce, Tennessee College of Applied Technology, and local industries, decided to become a Certified ACT Work Ready Community in hopes that this would aid in filling the skills gap. A committee was formed and focused on ways to improve the workforce inadequacies. One way a community can start to approach this inadequacy is to consider becoming a Certified ACT Work Ready Community.

Background

Hawkins County, Tennessee is a rural county in the upper east Tennessee region with a population of 56,833 (2010 census) and covers about 500 square miles. Rogersville is the

county seat and the second oldest town in Tennessee. Other towns include Bulls Gap, Church Hill, Mooresburg, Mount Carmel, and Surgoinsville.

Hawkins County Industrial Development Board is a non-profit organization made up of 14 board members and one paid employee. They have also contracted with NETWORKS Sullivan Partnership for marketing and recruitment efforts of Phipps Bend Industrial Park.

As the economy bounces back after the downturn several years ago, industries are expanding and new industries are locating in Hawkins County. In previous discussions with industries, one of their greatest needs is a qualified workforce. With continued discussion, the Hawkins County Industrial Board determined the focus should be on specialized training in specific areas pertaining to specific job functions. Industries have started expressing their need for specific qualifications, such as locating information, advanced math, and more reading comprehension skills, not only in their existing workforce but for the incoming workforce as well. After further review, the Certified ACT Work Ready Community Committee found that special attention was already being focused on high school juniors and seniors. The Hawkins County School system was already preparing an incoming workforce by offering the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) testing and Work Ethic Diplomas to high school juniors and seniors. The ACT NCRC is a credential awarded to an individual that verifies specific skills. These skills include reading for information, applied mathematics, and locating information. It assesses the individual's career readiness to determine if the skills they have align with the employer's needs.

There are four levels of the NCRC which are Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum. The Bronze level shows the individual has the skills needed to meet 16% of the jobs in the ACT JobPro database. The Silver level demonstrates they have the skills needed for 67% of the jobs, the Gold – 93%, and the Platinum demonstrates 99% of the jobs in the database. The NCRC is governed by ACT – a company well known with proven results and providing high-quality assessments with nearly 60 years of research. ACT is a trusted national leader in college and career readiness with proven metrics and long term results. Hawkins County needed a way to foster this oncoming pipeline of talent and to enhance or improve the current workforce. By becoming a Certified ACT Work Ready Community, Hawkins County can have a viable way to prove the qualifications the workforce has as well as improve upon any specific areas needed.

Coursework

Looking back at the information obtained in the various Certified Tennessee Economic Developer courses administered by UT Center for Industrial Services, the knowledge received from each of the courses was applied in the process of becoming a Certified ACT Work Ready Community; however, the Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course, the Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion Course and the Strategic Planning Course have been the most beneficial during this process.

The Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course and the Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion Course have helped the committee identify the type of workforce that is needed to not only attract an industry to Hawkins County but keep the industry here and to be competitive and flourish in its employment process.

In the Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course, Michael Philpot discussed spending time with the existing industries to learn what skill sets are important to them. Mr. Philpot also discussed the importance of developing a competitive workforce for your community. Laith Wardi discussed in the Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion Course the current workforce trends. Mr. Wardi commented how there is a skills-education gap in the manufacturing sector with a shortage of critical talent at all levels and having stackable credentials is a model for college and job success.

During this process, the Strategic Planning Course has helped the committee create a plan of action and build the right team it will take to implement the initiative for Hawkins County. The course showed what steps must be taken to show measurable outcomes. Without measurable outcomes, the committee wouldn't know whether there has been improvement and if the efforts are successful or unsuccessful.

What is a Certified ACT Work Ready Community?

ACT WorkKeys Systems is comprised of four major components: to understand job skill requirements, to measure individuals' skills, to develop skills to match those requirements and to certify individuals in essential skills needs.

Counties or parishes that participate in this initiative are certified through ACT as "work ready" when they meet their established goals set forth by ACT based on their population. These established goals are the number of individuals earning the ACT NCRC and the level of employer participation.

The ACT NCRC is the key to the ACT Work Ready Communities initiative. The ACT NCRC is designed to measure the skills of an individual. Some industries are currently using this as a tool to close the skill gaps between the workers and the job seekers. These certificates are portable and the tests may be taken as often as wanted to help improve an individual's score. Because the certificates can be taken anywhere, they are a very valuable tool for the individual and also help with the skills gap for the entire nation. The skills that are certifiable in the tests are essential for any job on any skill level. Reading for information, applied mathematics, and locating information are the top three certifiable skills in the NCRC tests.

What are we doing?

Upper East Tennessee has taken a regional approach to the Certified ACT Work Ready Communities initiative. Sullivan County has been in the process for approximately one and half years. Carter County, Washington County, Greene County, Hancock County, Johnson County, Unicoi County, and Hawkins County came together to make it a region-wide initiative. The State of Tennessee only has six counties that have been certified. All six counties are located in west Tennessee: Tipton County, Crockett County, Lake County, Obion County, Henry County, and Carroll County. Haywood County and Shelby County are two other counties in west Tennessee that are participating but not yet certified. There are no other counties that are certified or participating in Tennessee other than the ones listed and the counties of the upper east Tennessee region. By becoming a Certified ACT Community, it should give Hawkins County an edge over other parts of the state for industry recruitment. Nationally there are only 24 states that are participating in the Certified ACT Work Ready Communities program. However, all but two of the bordering states of Tennessee are participating in the ACT Work Communities

initiative, which means the counties Tennessee needs to be more aggressive to be competitive in the qualified workforce arena.

Who is involved?

Looking at the overall picture of the entire process the whole community has to be involved to be a successful Certified ACT Work Ready Community. The community needs business support as well as students and job seekers taking the NCRC tests. The main stakeholders in this initiative include:

- Hawkins County Industrial Development Board
- Hawkins County Mayor
- Chamber of Commerce
- Board of Education
- Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT)
- Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) Career First
- Local Industries
- Local Businesses

Others have been involved throughout the course of this initiative and will continue to be included, but the core group consists of these key players and their roles they play in the team.

- The Hawkins County Industrial Development Board is one of the main organizations that began this initiative for Hawkins County. As an economic development entity, their primary goal is to bring in sustainable industries to the community and to retain the industries already established. The biggest player

in any business is its employees. One must have a qualified workforce for a business or industry to be successful.

- The county mayor must be on board with the initiative to be successful. The Hawkins County Mayor has been supportive of the Certified Work Ready Communities Initiative and is looking to move things forward with our county.
- The local Chamber of Commerce Director works hand-in-hand with the Hawkins County Industrial Development Board Executive Administrative Coordinator. The Chamber of Commerce has assisted with the program with grant funds to fund the cost of software needed to profile jobs in businesses. This software will be used to help the local businesses and industries of Hawkins County begin the job profiling process at a reduced rate.
- The Board of Education has played a very important role for Hawkins County in this initiative. Last year Hawkins County high schools seniors earned 57 NCRC's in the first year of the program. This past May the rate increased nearly 500% with 255 NCRC's being awarded. The Hawkins County Board of Education has been doing the NCRC testing in the high schools for a couple of years now and Hawkins County has exceeded the goals for the emerging workforce. These are the current high school students who will be looking for a job in the future. They will be the "certifiable" workforce of tomorrow.
- Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) is a big supporter of the initiative and is offering the three main NCRC tests at their campus. TCAT has a

campus located in the Phipps Bend Industrial Park in Hawkins County and will be utilized greatly for testing of the employees inside Phipps Bend Industrial Park.

- The Hawkins County Industrial Development Board is the service provider for WIOA Career First. They work with the youth of Hawkins County to ensure they are ready for the workforce. They offer tutoring and job placements for the youth. The tutoring can be for any career certification including the NCRC.
- The local businesses and industries of Hawkins County have been very supportive in this process. Hawkins County has two industries in the community already using the NCRC as a tool for recruitment and promotion. Another one of the local industries, Cooper Standard Automotive, has been very supportive with this effort. The HR Director has attended all academies with the Executive Administrative Coordinator of the Hawkins County Industrial Development Board. Both of these individuals have given presentations to civic organizations and have had one on one meetings with other businesses in the community asking for support.

Goals and Outcomes

The goals set forth by ACT for Hawkins County to become a Certified ACT Work Ready Community are monitored by ACT. The outcome of these goals can be accessed on their website by the administrator in the community. The Hawkins County Industrial Development Board has assumed the responsibility of being the administrator for Hawkins County. The other goals for the community has been set forth by the committee. These goals include businesses that are using the NCRC (what improvements they have seen - such as workforce turnover rate,

skill set improvements, soft skills, etc.), the business participation, and the improvements of an individual's NCRC test level. More outcomes may need to be monitored as the process progresses.

The ultimate goal of Hawkins County is to provide a sustainable pipeline of talent from the existing workforce and the future workforce. Hawkins County will strive to improve the skill sets of the current workforce by increasing the number of workers with the NCRC. The ultimate goal is to improve upon those existing certificates already obtained from Bronze to Silver, Gold or Platinum levels. To obtain the goal the first step is to become a Certified ACT Work Ready Community. The Hawkins County Industrial Board is encouraging the industries to not only recommend the NCRC but to recognize it as a qualification. One way to encourage the industries to begin to recognize the NCRC in their company either preferring or requiring the NCRC for employment is to show the industries their return on investment (ROI). The ROI would be proved by showing them the cost of testing and/or job profiling would be significantly less than the cost associated with replacing the employee. The emerging workforce is currently being tested in their high school career. The Hawkins County Board of Education is offering the NCRC to all high school juniors and seniors. The NCRC can be taken in high school just like the ACT test that is given for students wishing to enroll in college.

Hawkins County wants to recruit the current and transitioning workforce by having more businesses recognize the NCRC, meaning they prefer applicants with the certification. The businesses can also use the NCRC as a promotional tool to be used for any promotions within their company. The workforce committee is also planning to meet with the Hawkins County Sheriff's Office to discuss how to possibly include taking the NCRC as part of the inmates

sentencing term. This is definitely a work in progress but by becoming a Certified ACT Work Ready Community is a giant step toward a better tomorrow.

With the ACT Work Ready Communities Initiative the goals for the counties are set forth by ACT. These goals must be completed two years from the “Go Live” date. Hawkins County has until June 2019 to become a Certified ACT Work Ready Community. Hawkins County has already achieved 86% of the goals required. Hawkins County has been #1 for the most improved county in Tennessee for the Certified ACT Work Ready Community initiative for several months and continues to remain #1. Although, there is a lot of work to be done Hawkins County is ahead of the game on accomplishing the goal to become a certified community.

Employee Case Study

As stated previously, this is a work in progress so the results are incomplete and continually changing. The Hawkins County Industrial Board is working with local industries that have already been using the NCRC as a tool to obtain their results. One of the local industries in particular has stated although they are still working on statistics they have seen at least a 50% improvement in turn-over rate and their attendance rate has improved dramatically as well. The HR Director at the company has stated that by using the NCRC as a tool to bring in candidates she can see an improvement on the type of people she interviews. Even though the NCRC only tests skill sets, the individual’s soft skills are indirectly improved as well. Hawkins County Schools also has a Work Ethics Diploma in their curriculum students can obtain. She

stated she prefers to use the Work Ethic Diploma in conjunction with the NCRC to find the best qualified candidate for the job.

Conclusion

Even though the Hawkins County Industrial Development Board is still obtaining the hard core facts on how the NCRC is changing the way companies find workers the results are still clear - no one can ever go wrong with furthering their education, whether it be obtaining a GED, attending a technical school or college, or improving their skill sets by obtaining the NCRC. Educated individuals will have a better chance at a job or a promotion.

Throughout this whole process the committee has learned it takes a well-planned and dedicated team – a whole community’s involvement.

In conclusion, it is evident there is a national skills gap problem and even though becoming a Certified ACT Work Ready Community may not be a perfect solution, Hawkins County is taking a step in the right direction to improve the inadequacy in the community. By becoming a Certified ACT Work Ready Community, the workforce of Hawkins County will improve. Hawkins County is preparing the future workforce with the skills they need to succeed in their chosen career path by offering the NCRC in high school as well as the ACT test. The complexity of testing the current and transitioning workforce will be made easier with TCAT and the support and involvement of the local businesses and industries. With the improved skills, the lives of the citizens would be bettered as well as the productivity for the existing industries and businesses and recruitment of new industries and businesses.

Resource Page

Course material from the UT Center for Industrial Services Tennessee Economic Developer Program

- Tennessee Marketing and Attraction Course
- Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion Course
- Tennessee Strategic Planning for Economic Development

ACT. www.workreadycommunities.org

U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts selected: Hawkins County, Tennessee
www.census.gov/quickfacts/map/INC110213/47073

Hawkins County, Tennessee-Statistics for your Community
www.factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/cf/1.0/en/county/Hawkins%20County

Hawkins County School District
www.hck12.net

Deloitte, Sponsored by The Manufacturing Institute,
“The skills gap in U.S. manufacturing 2015 and beyond”, 2015

ACT, Sponsored by National ACT
“The Condition of College and Career Readiness”, 2016

Bobo, Jeff. (2017, June 5) “Hawkins schools churning out more ‘work-ready’ graduates than ever before.” Kingsport Times News