

Agency has big ideas for small businesses

Underused program raising its profile

Yvette Armendariz
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Free job training and recruitment help is available to business owners, particularly those with fewer than 100 employees, and many of them don't know it.

The chairman of the Maricopa Workforce Connections wants to get out the word.

Richmond Vincent Jr., who chairs the job-training resource group's board, said free help is available to increase worker skill levels and to set up job fairs.

The agency's programs are designed to help create a more competitive workforce, which increases wages and reduce reduces the number of people seeking welfare, he said.

The county agency is best-known for helping job seekers - whether laid off or looking for something new - connect with training and information about job openings. But these one-stop centers also have a business component that has often been overlooked.

Only six businesses have tapped into the Employed Worker Program in the past three years, getting about \$253,000 in training dollars.

The On-the-Job Training Program has been tapped by just one business, which received \$5,000 toward training costs.

Maricopa Workforce Connections also offers technical-skills training aimed at information technology, engineering/manufacturing and biotechnology companies.

Eight companies have tapped about \$6 million in technical skills training grants to build skills of available workers. The grants can provide training in hopes that tech companies have less need to find foreign-born workers with H-1B visas, according to Workforce Connections. The Arizona Republic recently talked to Vincent about the agency's programs.

Arizona Republic: With the job shortages in certain industry sectors, are you getting more requests for job training?

Vincent: Yes. Many of these industries are either experiencing significant growth or a major downturn in business. We have identified the high-demand industries . . . these industries include health care, aerospace and aviation, biotech, information technology, small business, and advanced financial and business services.

AR: Which industries and businesses have been most aggressive about accessing your job-training program?

Vincent: The retail industry (including Wal-Mart, which uses the agency for job fairs).

We are currently in the process of formulating a training program in partnership with the Phoenix Workforce Connections and Maricopa Community Colleges to assist Intel in filling their employment needs. This program also will assist small to medium businesses fill positions vacated by employees taking positions with Intel.

AR: How does your job-training program work? Must the businesses match training dollars and/or meet goals for job creation or employee wages?

Vincent: Our employment services are provided to businesses at no cost. Our On-the-Job Training Program offers reimbursement of half the approved training cost for qualified businesses. The training must provide a promotional opportunity for the employee being trained and an increase in their current salary. (Companies also must provide benefits.)

AR: How is the training helping business currently using your program? Can you give specific examples?

Vincent: Our training programs (aimed at workers) have provided a number of qualified applicants for a number of Valley businesses. The most prevalent of these businesses is Macayo's. Bob Neckes, Macayo's corporate director of human resources, has been very successful in recruiting restaurant staff utilizing the career centers (to set up job fairs for his restaurants).

AR: It seems few small businesses take advantage of the program. Why is that?

Vincent: In the past, we focused primarily on the job-seeker component of our mission and not on businesses. We have recently adopted an economic-development approach by assisting businesses . . . In fact, we are in the process of formulating a comprehensive marketing strategy that will allow us to effectively market to small businesses.

AR: Where would you like to see small-business participation numbers?

Vincent: Our goal is to ensure that every small-business owner has the opportunity and access to utilize Maricopa Workforce Connections employer services. We believe that our employer services are developed to better serve small businesses, as most medium and large firms have the infrastructure necessary to provide their own employment services.

Having been a small-business owner in the past, I believe it is imperative that every small business utilize our employment services in some manner to improve their bottom line.

Reach the reporter at yvette.armendariz@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-4842.