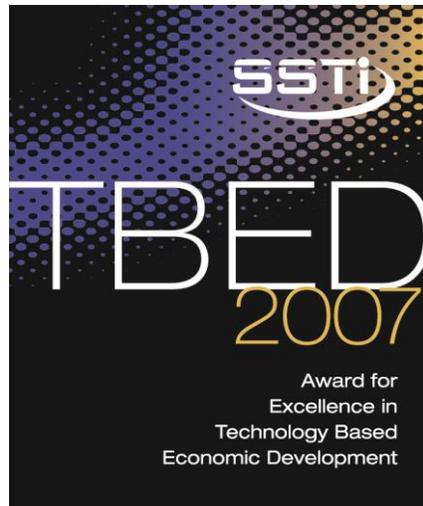


Podcast Interview



Sheryl Byran, Project Director,
The Virginia Council on Advanced
Technology Skills (VCATS)
Interviewed by: John Slanina &
Rhiannon Skipper, SSTI

*2007 Excellence in TBED Award Winner:
Enhancing the Science & Technology Workforce*

Mr. Slanina: Hello this is John Slanina and Rhiannon Skipper with SSTI. The following recording is an interview with Sheryl Byran, Project Director of The Virginia Council on Advanced Technology Skills, or VCATS. It was the recipient of the 2007 Excellence in TBED Award in the category: Enhancing the Science and Technology Workforce.

Ms. Skipper: Can you describe the manufacturing workforce shortage Virginia faces, and your initiative's solution to this problem?

Ms. Byran: One of the things that we did on behalf of industry was over the last three years we conducted what we call a Skilled Trades Gap Analysis and it was in two parts. It was basically done to verify what we thought; which was we would have a shortage of skilled workers in the workforce. The question was how soon was that going to happen, as well as what were we going to do about it. The results were quite startling. One of which is that we had within the main manufacturing sector alone, the largest number of employees that are nearing retirement. The question was how were we going to fill the pipeline, create a pipeline, etc. The answer was we had no idea. Also within a three year time frame of 2007 and 2010, the manufacturing technician alone, that gap, was over 22,000. When we looked at the institutional capacity within our Virginia community college system, now this is one of our major suppliers of trained skilled workers. We found that 10 out of the 23 colleges were at or above capacity. So we had an issue. We had an issue that we didn't have a solution for that currently existed.

We had two organizations; two state-wide trade organizations; the Virginia Manufacturers Association, and the Virginia Biotechnology Association come together with their boards as well as their membership, to put together a solution to the problem. What we ended up doing was going after a Department of Labor grant for some seed monies of funding to get a program a certification off the ground and running. So we were the recipients of one out of eleven hydro training grants awarded in October of 2006 to put together a systemic response to the shortage. We developed a system of certification levels, one, two and three to respond to that need and actually started building the pipeline as well as training the pipeline, or tracking the people, engaging the people, assessing the people. And if they needed some type of training, train the people.

Mr. Slanina: Great, looking through the setup of your program, why is it that you found it be so important to put employers and companies right in the center of your program?

Ms. Byran: The employers play a key role in that; they drive the demand. They own the issues, so to have them at the heart of the solution was critical in the success. Because that said that they'd buy into, they will help develop, as well as validate the result. So having them at the center, at the heart was critical in the overall success of the program, as well as putting up matching funds to help fund the program.

Mr. Slanina: In the original question you talked about the three levels of certification system that you designed. Can you give an overview of those three levels and the differences between each?

Ms. Byran: What we decided to do was first start with building level one, which we call the Entry Level Manufacturing Technician. That's all about the foundation, the fundamentals of what do I need to be successful in the world of manufacturing? What do I need? What skill sets do I need in order to be competitive, in order to be successful in the environment? Then taking that and adding rigor, adding leadership skills to, and getting together what we call level two, which really starts building on the foundational skills and adding that rigor more of the technical aspects of the competencies.

Then level three, we get into specialization. For example, if I want to be a maintenance mechanic, I'll still need those foundational level issues or competencies of one and two, but I'm going to go off on this tab and be more specialized in that area. So the way we sum it up is basically by looking at it in terms of a spinal cord. We define the spinal cord, which is the foundation – the competencies you need to meet regardless of what industry you go into, or how you are going to set yourself up for success. Then start building off of the branches. The branches of specialization are like that lab technician, or the maintenance mechanic, etc.

Mr. Slanina: In your application for the award you discussed the three groupings of partners you use to monitor the results of your initiative. Why did you choose this model?

Ms. Byran: We chose that model based on the Department of Labor's Competency Model, which really focuses in on the workplace, the academic area as well as the personal effectiveness. When you look at how we've structured our sponsorships, our partnerships, we've got the industry of course that's at the heart of setting the standard, helping to develop and validate the competencies. Then we work with the academic environment – the academia to say where is a really good outlet to partner, and to help disseminate the program. Being the

training arm of the state, that was a natural fit. Then working also with the Workforce Investment Board, which really gets into the one stop, the job centers to help attract the people and get the people funneling into the program so that we can train them and fill that pipeline.

Ms. Skipper: VCATS is still a pretty young program. Can you provide any examples of next steps for expansion, or additional outreach for the program?

Ms. Byran: Definitely. One of the things that we have really focused in on is for example, our regions and our neighboring states. We've had West Virginia come forth. North Carolina that said, we like your model we want to potentially adapt a model that you are utilizing to solve the same problem in our state. One of the things that we've found early on, once again is the fact that we're not alone. It's not a Virginia problem. Having come from industry and worked in numerous states, encountering the problem, lack of a skilled workforce was always there and prevalent. We're working with neighboring states to adopt our model as well as with the National Association of Manufacturers, NAM.

Mr. Slanina: Can you explain the process by which you partnered with NAM's Dream and Do It campaign? Especially how important has this been to your development of the program?

Ms. Byran: Our partnership with NAM has been very critical and important as it pertains to the youth. Once again, going back to our gap analysis and looking at where are we going to find these people? Where are the pools of populations of available people to fill the pipeline, and to start getting the gap filled? We saw that there is a need in the 16 to 24 year olds, to start engaging them early on into the profession, into the career paths of advanced technology. When we looked at NAM, they had a wonderful program that had a proven track record to do that. To educate, to attract, and to engage that age group, the youth, into the manufacturing sector. We went out and we actually became part of the Dream It Do It campaign initiative and have now a statewide initiative going on throughout Virginia.

Mr. Slanina: Now that your initiative has been recognized as a Best Practice, there is going to be other states, other regions of the country looking at your initiative and trying to replicate it. Are there any components of your specific program that if they would happen to be excluded when replicated by other states or regions, would prevent many of the accomplishments of the VCAST program from being reached?

Ms. Byran: One of which is never underestimate the impact on the economy. So you really need to do a thorough gap analysis to understand where the need is, and what are the current resources or programs out there that can address the needs. Never reinvent the wheel. If you can leverage existing programs, especially as it pertains to the Department of Labor funding, to grow what is currently in existence. One thing that is really, really key that we believe is going to make us successful is marketing. You can have the best program out there, but if you don't appropriately market it to the right people, using the right resources it will fail. Stressing marketing and how you attract and engage, and educate people will be so key, in the sustainability of anyone's program.

Mr. Slanina: Great, thank you. In your own application as well, you mentioned how you've been able to establish ties with the leadership of the state. Do you have any recommendations for leadership of other TBED programs about how to establish ties, and really engage their state legislatures and locally elected representatives?

Ms. Byran: One thing that we have found is that you can't talk enough about your initiative. Really going out and building the collaborations, the partnerships with the community college system, with industry, with workforce, and really leveraging that to your advantage is how you get the ear of legislature. One of the things that we've also done is to host breakfasts, to host luncheons, to host sessions in which we pull those key decision makers together and say, this is what's going on. This is the impact it has on the economy, the state of Virginia, and here's a solution to help further this cause.

Mr. Slanina: Finally are there any additional lessons learned just from administering this program that you'd like to share with the listening audience?

Ms. Byran: One of the key components is value. That value proposition statement. One of the things that we've found, especially when we talked to the different populations of people, is they want to know what's in it for me? So really being able to articulate that value proposition to all audiences, whether they are the employer, the employee, it doesn't matter. It's going to be really key, as far as the sustainability and how successful the program is. I think having a program that is well articulated, that shows value back to the bottom line, return on investments from the employer standpoint is going to key as well as with the employee. What does this mean to my pathway? What does this mean to my career? What does this mean to my family, my future as far as my career is concerned? How you communicate that will be the utmost of importance.

Sheryl Byran, Project Director of
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More information about VCATS is available at: <http://www.vacats.org/project/>.
For more information about the Excellence in TBED awards, please visit:
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