

Regional Employer Survey

Meeting the local demand for labor market information

The partners of the Fergus Falls WorkForce Center, as part of their “Demand Driven” mission, created, distributed, collated and released a survey of regional businesses that featured high-growth, high-demand occupations. This paper serves as a roadmap for other offices interested in duplicating this effort.

OVERVIEW

The staff of the Fergus Falls WorkForce Center, featuring partners from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), Rural Minnesota CEP, Rehabilitation Services and Veterans Employment Services, discussed how information is vital to help guide job seekers to satisfying careers. During discussions it was pointed out that DEED’s labor market analysts distribute a publication predicting high-demand, high-growth occupations in a 9-county area of West Central Minnesota. But staff wondered how they could more specifically identify jobs within those occupations that had two basic characteristics:

- 1) **Jobs that were most often open.**
- 2) **Jobs that were most difficult to fill.**

In addition, employers were asked **to identify their top five basic skills** for each job they listed. With that data, job seekers could determine if they had any existing skills that would enable them to better enter a particular occupation.

Finally, a **soft skills question** was added as more employers reported a lack of soft skills among their newer employees (as reported to the Business Services Specialist during business visits).

METHODOLOGY

Here is a methodology of how the Fergus Falls Regional Employer Survey was planned and conducted.

Preparing the Partners

- 1) After agreeing on the importance of this information, the economic development and chamber of commerce representatives were involved in the survey process by providing support and some funding for mailing. A mailing list was also merged into WorkForce Center mailing lists.

- 2) Partners within the agency agreed upon their level of expertise in such areas as database management, collating surveys, mailing help, basic writing, analyzing data, etc.
- 3) Partners decided on how survey costs would be split among partners. Costs included printing, postage, return mail postage, layout and design of the printed piece and printing costs. Additional costs could include online survey costs and a follow-up postcard to businesses reminding them to return the survey.
- 4) Partners agreed to survey businesses that offered high-demand, high-pay occupations. They also agreed to survey businesses within commuting distance: 25 miles in the case of Fergus Falls. It was also noted that some businesses offered several different types of occupations, some not in demand or not high pay; these were incorporated into the data as well because they did come from a business that had better jobs.
- 5) Additional questions should be explored, but limited to regional issues and value/relevance to employers/job seekers. Employers were asked to identify their business type in as the only differentiating aspect of the survey.
- 6) Consider contacting chamber and others in the neighboring communities if the survey will hit their communities. Consider asking their participation.

Preparing the Survey

- 1) Businesses that offered high-demand, high-pay occupations were targeted to survey.
- 2) Partners discussed what should be included on the survey, keeping in mind that shorter is better. One person created a rough draft that was edited. Input was given by the local Labor Market Analyst, who also provided additional survey help.
- 3) An on-line component of the survey was discussed, but staff opted to go with direct mail with an on-line survey to be strongly considered for next year.
- 4) A cover letter had to be written (see sample).
- 5) The survey design and layout were agreed upon, following several drafts (see sample). Someone needs to be in charge of this preparation project. Some key notes about the survey:
 - a. The survey was short, less than 3 pages.
 - b. Only the “soft skills” part was in a ranking format; all other parts were in the words from the business itself.
 - c. The ranking format had an even number of choices, thereby eliminating a middle-of-the-road option.
- 6) As the survey was being completed, a mailing list of businesses was developed and labels were printed. A self-addressed stamped envelope (#9) was included in the mailing envelope (#10) along with the survey. We used real stamps on the return envelope as people would be more apt not to waste a stamp while an imprint was more apt to be ignored.
- 7) The surveys were mailed out on the same day. Plan to send a postcard reminder about a week later to businesses. Give businesses two weeks to return the survey.
- 8) A news release was distributed to media informing area residents about the survey. This would be followed up by a media reminder for businesses to return the survey. The chamber and economic commission also promoted the survey.

Collecting the Surveys

- 1) The regional labor market analyst, who put his stamp of approval on the survey format, volunteered to initially collate the data.
- 2) Surveys were collected and remained unopened. Following the survey deadline, the returned surveys were hand-delivered to the labor market analyst.
- 3) The analyst returned the survey information into an excel spreadsheet.

Tabulating the Surveys

- 1) The data needs to be tabulated. This is a highly time-consuming task as assumptions have to be made to merge similar job titles and descriptions.
- 2) After the survey results are known, the job counselor on the WorkForce Center team assigns personality profile to each occupational category.
- 3) Data should reflect the top three listed jobs in each occupational category. In addition, at least five top needed skills and the top soft skills should be listed.
- 4) Median salary for the region should be determined and listed.
- 5) Any additional information about the occupational category can be included.

Creating the Publication

- 1) The Fergus Falls survey was put into a spiral-bound booklet and distributed to area high schools, libraries and interested parties. The format was chosen for durability and attractiveness, without the cost of more traditional publishing methods.
- 2) A team member with desktop publishing experience offered to format the Fergus Falls results. The files were saved into a PDF format which was delivered to a local printer for printing and collating. The cost was about \$3 each.
- 3) Offices with no desktop publishing experience could put out bids to print vendors to determine formatting and printing costs, which could be cost allocated among partners.

Follow up and distribution

- 1) A news conference was called among partners to promote the new jobs survey and the resulting publication.
- 2) The BSS in the Fergus Falls office, along with CEP managers, distributed surveys to libraries and school officials in the survey region.
- 3) Surveys were given to all counselors to be used with clients.
- 4) A PDF file of the survey was available for the asking; in addition, the file was available for download from partners' websites.