

Promoting Growth Through Education: The Maine Employers' Initiative

By Ellen C. Lamb

It's a chicken-and-egg question. When it comes to economic development, which comes first: more opportunities or more people? Since business growth requires both, the Maine Employers' Initiative (MEI) seeks to jumpstart the process with more opportunities *for* more people — opportunities for educational advancement sponsored and recognized by Maine businesses. MEI, a program of the Maine Development Foundation, provides Maine's public and private employers with technical assistance, training and statewide recognition for taking steps to support college degree and certificate achievement for their employees. Under the 3-year old effort, more than 95 private and public employers, employing over 44,000 Maine people, have pledged to take "one more step" to support higher education for their employees, ranging from financial support to flexible time off to things as simple as formal recognition.

There is a real need. According to the U.S. Census, in 2007, slightly more than one-third of Maine people over the age of 25 held a college degree, yet the New England average of degree holders was 47%. Maine is ranked lowest in New England on college degree attainment, putting the state at a disadvantage for job retention and attraction. At the same time, the Maine Department of Labor predicts that over 45% of the jobs created between 2004 and 2014 will require a post secondary education and, of the 40 occupations with the fastest projected growth rate, over half of those will require a postsecondary education.

For Deborah Whitworth, Managing Director for Human Resources Consulting and Workforce

Readiness Chair at Lebel & Harriman's, MEI has proved to be a valued partner in the broader goal of workforce readiness, preparing Maine employees to compete in an economy that has changed radically over the past two decades. When Whitworth agreed to serve as Workforce Readiness Director for the Maine State Council of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) two years ago, she quickly turned to MEI for assistance to put together programs to help Maine employers train and prepare their staff. "I didn't want to reinvent the wheel," she said. The Maine State Council of SHRM announced a partnership with MEI last year, and Lebel & Harriman joined the ranks of Maine employers taking one more step to encourage higher education for its employees.

Although Lebel & Harriman is a small firm, Whitworth said, employee development is just as important for small firms as for big ones. Working with clients, Whitworth recommends that companies adopt policies that reimburse tuition in whole or in part and other expenses for employees; allow employees to attend classes during normal working hours; and set standards for performance, such as earning a grade of "B" or higher. Lebel & Harriman pays for training, credentials fees, and continuing education units to maintain credentials. The firm's performance evaluation process includes a Development Plan for each employee, asking employees to identify specific actions planned to improve their performance and their professional capacity.

Whitworth sees MEI playing an important role in emphasizing the leadership value of employee education, making the point that employee development is not only good business, but good corporate citizenship. She refers her clients to MEI for initial assessments of their current employee development programs, followed by recommendations for ways to

take that “one more step”: raising awareness of educational opportunities, mentoring employees, and/or providing a pathway to financial assistance. “I just have to make the introduction. Their website [http://www.mdf.org/mei_overview.php] is phenomenal, and their written materials are excellent.”

Most of her clients understand the importance of employee education, she said, but MEI provides a framework and context. The key is the ability to break the larger goal — boosting employee education — into smaller pieces, which the MEI program helps employers do. “When I teach a management class, I could

make it sound like it’s really, really hard,” she said. “But I try to boil things down to the smallest, simplest, most obvious parts — like, why wouldn’t you do it this way? How can we make this as simple as we can? Because then not only will people do it, but they’ll do it the right way. We have to make it manageable, and people have to have help.”

MEI, Whitworth said, makes employee development doable and manageable for businesses of all sizes in Maine, with lots of help along the way. “It’s easy, and it’s important. Why wouldn’t you do it?”