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Feature Articles

March, 2007
From Our Entrepreneur Issue

WIRED Together for Job Creation

by Suzanne Driscoll

The good news is last year the nine-county area surrounding Rochester was selected by the Federal Department of Labor to receive \$15 million to support economic development and job creation. The bad news is we really needed it. According to Mayor Robert Duffy, Rochester not only leads the state of New York in the number of jobs lost, but was also named as one of the top three cities in the U.S. experiencing workforce reduction including Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan. We also ranked 334th out of 367 U.S. metropolitan areas for job growth.

In a request for proposals issued by the Employment and Training Administration of the Department of Labor, it was stated that, "Global competition is typically seen as a national challenge. In reality, the front lines of the battlefield are regional, where companies, workers, researchers, entrepreneurs, and governments come together to create competitive advantage. Those regions that are successful have connected three key elements: workforce skills and lifelong learning strategies, investment and entrepreneurship strategies, and regional infrastructure and economic development strategies." In order to achieve these goals in distressed areas, Rochester was one of 13 regions in the U.S. to receive funding under the Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) program.

One of the most impressive elements of the Finger Lakes Partnership's application for the funds had to be the number of agencies and educational institutions that committed to work together to achieve results. From our local universities and community colleges to all the various agencies already working on job development, these include Greater Rochester Enterprise, Rochester Business Alliance, High Tech Rochester, representatives from the nine counties, the Infotonics Technology Center, Cornell Agriculture and Food Tech Park, and even two venture capital companies. "WIRED is a very appropriate acronym for the initiative, not only because of what the abbreviation stands for, but because we are all wired together as a group working toward a common goal," says Finger Lakes WIRED Managing Director Matthew Hurlbutt. "The closer we work together and collaborate, the better off the whole region will be." From day one in preparing the application, RochesterWorks!, also managed by Hurlbutt, was the obvious choice to lead the initiative. Created in 2000 as part of the Workforce Investment Act, the RochesterWorks! system connects 18 different federally-funded employment and training programs in Monroe County. They have since served thousands of job seekers and businesses annually through their two Career Centers.

WIRED Strategy

for System Transformation
.....
Energize
the region's entrepreneurial economy.

Catalyze
regional innovation and convert orphan or under-utilized technology into vibrant business ventures.

Train and empower
a workforce to successfully compete in the changing global economy.

Build
21st century innovation infrastructures.

Attainable Goals

The Finger Lakes WIRED Governing Board spent several months strategizing on the program goals, deciding which industries to target, and developing guidelines for distributing the funds. These strategy sessions were strongly recommended by the Department of Labor as they didn't want the regions using the money like a grant, but rather a task force using resources to change the way they operate.

Training Funds Available to Businesses

As of January 12, 2007, Finger Lakes WIRED awarded a total of \$345,000 to 27 area businesses to train 236 workers in Monroe, Livingston, Ontario, Wayne, and Wyoming counties. This is out of an initial allocation of \$700,000 for companies in the following industry clusters that the WIRED Governing Board plans to target for job retention and development:

- Optics and imaging
- Biotech and life sciences
- Food and agriculture
- Advanced manufacturing
- Alternative energy

Business services, information technology, and healthcare organizations are also encouraged to apply for funds to train employees in process improvement initiatives such as LEAN, ISO and Six Sigma. Organizations in these qualified industries may request up to \$50,000 per application for training that can be completed in 12 months or less. The company must also provide matching funds equal to the amount requested. The training should result in the acquisition of industry-recognized certifications, productivity and process improvement procedures, or in-demand skills.

One lucky recipient was Tariff Affiliates Inc., a service provider specializing in telecom and utility voice management, bill payment, and cost reduction services for large, multi-location companies. The \$14,286 scholarship "allowed us to complete Type I and II SAS-70 training which is a great benefit to Tariff Affiliates, our employees and our clients," according to CEO Robert Calman. And HR Manager Deborah Kurvach was amazed at how fast and easy the application and approval process was. "We received the approval notice in just a few days, and we estimate the return on our investment will be 200 percent in the first 12 months. The funding is helping to cut our costs for this important training, and we're looking forward to the positive impact its completion will have on our business." The WIRED grants help small businesses grow in areas such as technology, and according to Kurvach, "this type of business growth usually correlates to job growth--both in the number of jobs and the quality of job opportunities."

Opportunities for Entrepreneurs

In addition to training, the next big thrust for Finger Lakes WIRED is to provide resources to encourage entrepreneurship in Rochester. A recent report by the U.S. Council on Competitiveness concluded that, "The Rochester area surpasses most regions in the U.S. on many dimensions relevant to supporting innovation and entrepreneurship. However, to date, the region has not become an entrepreneurial success story. A fundamental challenge is cultural--the region lacks a strong entrepreneurial environment." That is about to change.

Education Initiatives--Instilling Entrepreneurship at an Early Age

The Finger Lakes WIRED Partnership decided to start as early as the middle school years to instill the spirit of

WIRED Outcomes

Achieved by End of Project

1. Increase entered employment, employment retention, and earnings change rate by 5%

2. Increase number of training courses by 30%

3. Increase number of companies accessing training by 200 and individuals trained by 1,200

4. Involve 225 high school students in entrepreneurial activities

5. Involve 165 high school teachers in workforce and entrepreneurial training

6. Increase retention of college and high school graduates by 10%

7. Increase job growth from 0.1% per year

entrepreneurship. Proposals were accepted in January 2007 for programs that will expand the offerings of science and technology camp-like activities for sixth through eighth graders and young women and minorities. "The earlier we can interest kids in careers involving science, technology, engineering, and math, the farther ahead we will be in expanding the awareness that the Finger Lakes is a great locale for technology companies," says Hurlbutt.

For high schoolers, the University of Rochester and the Kauffman Foundation already offer a Young Entrepreneurs Academy where students actually start and run a business. They find investors, file a DBA, and come up with a service or product to sell. "We plan to replicate this program at Geneseo, Hobart, and Genesee Community College so we can teach entrepreneurship and provide students with real life experiences," according to Hurlbutt.

At the college level, a Regional Apprentice System will be expanded at Monroe, Finger Lakes and Genesee Community Colleges. Long a tradition in Europe, several new education/training programs for three targeted industry clusters-- optics, printing/packaging, bio-manufacturing, and food processing will be funded by WIRED for the Finger Lakes region.

Any how many times have teachers been asked in the classroom, "Why do we have to learn this? When will we ever use it again?" Now teachers will be able to answer the question from their own hands-on experience. WIRED will provide funding to place teacher interns in small and medium-size companies during the summer. This will create linkages between educators and the targeted industries so they can say, "I was at a company that makes parts for NASA, and this is how they use high level math and science skills."

The Finger Lakes WIRED Partnership has pledged to "be a region that has transformed silos into pillars of strength."

One of the main benefits of being selected along with 12 other regions in the country is that they can learn from each other. Representatives of the "WIRED Academy" meet quarterly

in different locations to hear from experts and share success stories, and they also call each other frequently for advice.

The Finger Lakes WIRED Partnership has pledged to "be a region that has transformed silos into pillars of strength by linking them together through proactive, goal-oriented collaboration." The goal and the hope is that with these agencies, colleges, and county governments working together, Rochester might reclaim its former stature in terms of job creation and the spirit of innovation for which it has always been known.

average (1990-2004) to national average of ~1.2%

8. Reverse decline in average wages relative to national average

9. Establish a baseline and measure increase in employer satisfaction

10. Train 450 entrepreneurs and innovators in high-growth sectors

11. Develop specialized cadre of 20 technology "business starters"

12. Double business plan participation

13. Start 20 companies from orphan technologies

14. Start 15 incremental technology businesses

15. Create a self-sustaining knowledge database

16. Create four industry-led associations that stimulate sector growth

17. Intervene with 30 high-risk companies

The following projects have been approved by the Finger Lakes WIRED Governing Board in order to help entrepreneurs in the area start new businesses, increase revenue, and expand employment:

Master of Science degree in Science and Technology Commercialization University of Rochester

In order to address the shortage of people who can look at a technology and determine whether it can be commercialized, the U of R is offering an Executive Program for the study of entrepreneurship. WIRED is also providing funding to the university for partial student scholarships.

Entrepreneurship and Strategic Growth Immersion Sequence Program Rochester Institute of Technology

This program targets high-growth potential, small-enterprise managers wishing to join or lead commercialization teams. Potential and existing entrepreneurs are invited, and there is a minimal cost to participants.

Entrepreneur Boot Camp The Entrepreneur Network (TEN)

Funded by Monroe County's COMIDA group as well as WIRED, TEN offers practical, business-oriented, hands-on educational programs to introduce entrepreneurs to new ideas and avenues to attract capital. The TEN program takes place over a six-month period and includes a Boot Camp, workshops, and panel events designed to optimize interaction with leading local and national entrepreneurial experts. Approved applicants (founders, CEOs, or those that have a controlling position in an established technology-based business) were charged \$250 for the entire program. Registration for the November 8-10, 2007 Boot Camp closes on April 2nd. Visit www.TEN-ny.com for further details.

Pre-Seed Workshops High Tech Rochester

Two-day sessions will provide an assessment of business potential for a specific invention and will foster a collaboration with other technologists and inventors knowledgeable about business creation. Participants will be connected with a business network for future assistance.

Small-Business Innovation Research Program (SBIR) Outreach and Access High Tech Rochester

The goal is to move the region's participation in the Small Business Administration's grant funding opportunities to a higher level. Will educate entrepreneurs and small business owners with proposal reviewers, proposal preparers, and solicitation finders.

Tech Commercialization Process High Tech Rochester

Initiative will augment the traditional licensing programs of the local research institutions with entrepreneurs and product development specialists to identify and nurture high potential technologies and lead them into the marketplace.

Rochester Regional Business Plan Contest Greater Rochester Enterprise

The goal is to stimulate entrepreneurial awareness and business formation, and develop entrepreneurial skills.

BSM

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