

Regional Root Causes: Focus Groups Findings

The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (Initiative) conducted focus group meetings by sub-region (North, South and West) and by industry groups. Each shortage occupation was discussed and the root causes of shortages documented. This section of the report will summarize these groups' findings on these root causes. The final section of the report will integrate the solutions discussed by these groups with the findings of the other research conducted by the Initiative. The Initiative findings on solutions, strategies and recommendations for addressing the region's critical skills shortages will be in this final section. This section will summarize these groups discussion on the root causes of these shortages by industry and occupation.

Manufacturing

The West region's group discussed root causes involving *Industrial Mechanics*. For this occupation the group saw a reduced focus and reduced funding of vocational education programs. This reduced funding forces schools to focus on college prep classes and No child left behind requirements. The public sees manufacturing occupations as low level positions, because of the work environment and pay in the past. There is also a lack of awareness of how technology has improved/impacted the work sites and pay scales of many manufacturing employers. There was agreement that the main root cause was higher benefits and pay outside of this region, where there is more competition for manufacturing employees. Some are national companies and provide better pay and benefits than are in the region. There is a higher cost of living elsewhere so salaries are naturally higher. Employers in the region will accept lower pay and lack of work ethic and initiative. Families and schools are not modeling; teaching or requiring accountability and responsibility in young people. There are not as many intact family units. Families are not providing enough structure or discipline for there young people.

The West region group discussed root causes involving *Front Line Supervisor*. There is a lack of training and OJT experience available in the region. It's expensive to provide coaching, mentoring or supervisory training to the region's employees. Many promotions are reactive instead of proactively planned by employers. Persons in this occupation have added accountability and communication responsibilities, which leave them caught in the middle with added paper work. Job applicants have a lack of people management skills and find it difficult to transition from being an individual contributor to a supervisor. It is difficult to select/identify employees with supervisory ability.

The South region's group discussed root causes involving *Maintenance Employee, Maintenance Machinist, Tool and Die and Operators/Machine Operators*. For this occupation the group saw a lack of training in the region and training needs to be more specific to the job requirements. The group saw no "driving" organization to push a regional assessment of manufacturers training needs. The lack of awareness of manufacturing occupations was a major root cause of the shortages. Area youth lack awareness of these occupations because no visibility through elementary and middle school career programs. Manufacturing has not promoted these occupations because the cost to do so has been viewed as having limited business value. The group also sees the region's poor pay and benefits affecting shortages. Few

jobs are available as population is flat or low growth for last several years. Manufacturers have very competitive markets and low profit margins which keep salaries low. Difficult working conditions also contribute to the problem with lots of overtime, being on call for last minute line changes due to production priorities and dirty environments in the plants. The small town environment is seen as being limiting to job applicants. The region has an image of limited economic growth which leads young adults to leave the area.

The North region's group discussed root causes involving *PLC Technicians and Maintenance Technicians*. For this occupation the group saw a lack of awareness and/or understanding of these careers. There is a negative perception in the region because so many companies have closed in recent years. There is a perception that jobs from the region have gone overseas, because of a media focuses on this issue. The image that the media reports are not positive and media thinks all manufacturers are the same, manufacturing occupations are viewed as low level positions. A local manufacturer lack "branding", the national economy is driven to "go buy" not "go make". The public is not familiar with manufacturing terms like "PLC"; the industry is caught up in acronyms. These acronyms limit applicants to job postings. The public doesn't recognize the level of expertise required for these careers because of an outdated view of manufacturing. The root cause of higher salaries outside of this region is because a higher cost of living outside of this region. Other regions are closer to airports and have better public transportation. Larger population drives more diverse cultural and entertainment activities. The region doesn't promote the benefits and affordability of living here. Those that do work and do business in the region, like it here, and don't perceive the need to promote the benefits of our region. Jr. High and High School students are unaware of these careers. Educators are not targeting or preparing students for current manufacturing careers. There is a disconnect between JR High, High School and local employers. These employers are too busy and are not making it a priority to promote these jobs. There is a lack of voc. teachers and/or informed counselors on these jobs and they don't perceive these jobs as careers. These teacher and counselors lack of knowledge about manufacturing and are too focused on "teaching to the test".

The North region's group also discussed root causes involving *Front Line Supervisor*. Most of comments made mirrored the discussion in West region. But the group focused on the role of this position which many times is caught in the middle between the team's need for flexibility and completing company goals. This also leads to not always supported "backed up" by upper management. Management is sometimes too busy and acts before they fully understand a supervisor's concerns or decisions. Supervisors often have more accountability without authority. These position undergo a "Baptism by fire", companies haven't invested much "upfront" time in supervisors.

Health Care

The West region's group discussed root causes involving *Medical Office Assistants*. The group saw training programs not fully preparing graduates for current job requirements. These training programs don't prepare students in both clinical and business functions. These programs need internship requirements for students to gain hand-on job experience. There is a perception of low status and pay with this occupation because there is not as much contact

with the doctors, it is not a “fancy” job title and healthcare hierarchy values degrees. Job applicants do value the status, because of the position job requirements, salaries are higher, and these positions often on track to become Office Managers

The West region’s group also discussed root causes involving *Register Nurses (RN)*. The group indicated that doctor’s offices can not compete with the salary and health care benefits hospitals can offer. Doctor’s offices are smaller than hospitals because of tradition within the profession, the smaller sized communities keep practices small and offices have other spending requirements like mandatory malpractice. Healthcare is expanding in the region because technology has allowed the region to provide better health care locally. People prefer to stay local for specialized care. More doctors are coming to the region because of a strong community effort to recruit them. The region is drawing patients from an extended region of the state. Patients are demanding health care to provide more services locally to address aging population and patients are becoming more informed consumers of these services.

The West region’s group discussed root causes involving *Medical Lab Techs*. The group has seen a shortage problem in this occupation for the past 10 years. The average age of the current Medical Lab Tech is 40 – 50 year old. There are very few training/educational programs available in region to address this problem. The West region’s group discussed root causes involving *Occupational and Physical Therapists*. The group indicated that demand and numbers needed for this occupation is small, when there is a need; it has a major impact on the health care provider. The west region’s group discussed root causes involving *Nurse Practitioners (LPN)*. Nurse Practitioners are very difficult to find in or recruit to this region. The numbers needed are not great, but when they are needed, the need is great.

The South region’s group discussed root causes involving *Certified Nursing Aid (CNA)*. The group identified as a major root cause poor pay and benefits. They indicated the problem with benefits involve poor enrollment in benefit plans which make plans too costly. Employees can’t afford or have other spending priorities. Employer’s profits are limited due to Medicare and Medicaid payment restrictions which keep salaries down. The occupation also involves difficult hours and working conditions. It can be a high stress job, due to patient and patient family needs. The work schedule requires overtime and 24/7 care schedule. The occupation causes high absenteeism due to stress and lack of support like childcare. Working with patients is hard, can be a heavy work load.

The South region’s group also discussed root causes involving both *RN & LPN*. The group recognized a major root cause of better wages and benefits outside the region. Job applicants have an easy commute to Indiana and larger labor markets. Indiana can pay better wages due to tort limits and a better tax base. Difficult hours and working conditions were also identified as a root cause. Hours are not family friendly and this is not considered glamorous work. Women feel more empowered and/or entitled to search for a position that best meets their schedules and priorities. The education requirements of the occupation are time consuming and potential students don’t look far enough ahead to the payoff involved. This region’s group also discussed *Medical Lab Techs*. Regional Hospitals identified a shortage problem for the past 10 years. The group comments on this occupation mirrored those from the other regions. They also discussed *Occupational and Physical Therapists and indicated* that most therapists are hired through outsourcing.

The North region's group also discussed root causes involving RN. The group saw as a major root cause the physically and emotionally challenging nature of the career. Physically you're on your feet for long shifts, it a very fast paced work load and nurses are increasing responsible for a greater number of patients. The aging workforce in nursing makes lifting more difficult. The occupation takes an emotional toll, with sicker and more demanding patients. Insurance costs are increasing and patients are not taking the responsibility to care of themselves. The standard of care has increased and technology has increased quality and cost of care that patient demand. The hour's required make for a challenging work/life balance with long shifts. Younger nurses feel entitled to more "life" than "work". The aging workforce of nurses feels they have "done their time". Rotating shifts takes away from family time. Shortages mean less staff which means more work covering shifts. There is strong competition between regional HC employers. Healthcare employers don't collaborate on shortage problems.

The North region's group also discussed root causes involving LPN. The group saw less pay than a RN a major root cause. They also discussed CNA's and the problem with low wages that make it easy for CNA's to leave the HC field and work elsewhere. Job Applicants for these positions have chaotic personal and family lives. Job readiness skills are not in place for successful job performance among these job applicants. Social/life skills do not translate to appropriate patient care. Many CNA's are products of poor multi-generational, low socio-economic parenting family units and don't know how to manage responsibility. Others problems involve transportation costs and childcare costs. The jobs are physically and emotionally demanding and have high turnover rates. CNA's tend to be less fit/healthy and have difficulty performing physical duties. These job are not viewed as a professional or "Glam Job". Financial aid is readily available, so individuals are not as "invested" in making the position work and the educational programs have less stringent educational requirements. The group also discussed *Physical and Respiratory Therapists and Medical Lab Techs and Lab Techs* their comments mirrored discussion of the other regions.

Transportation, Distribution and Logistics

The West region's group discussed root causes involving *Material Handlers - Specialized Forklift Drivers*. The group saw as a major root cause the insufficient employment qualifications. Job applicants have poor interviewing and job readiness skills. There is a lack of knowledge of how to get a job. This lack of skills and training is because schools do not prepare people with job readiness skills. The focus on "No child left behind" may be the reason for this lack attention to job readiness. Job applicants don't have an "Ultimate Career Goal"; they view these jobs as temporary to "settles for" because you don't get high annual pay increases. The short training time involved in these jobs cause people to "Job Hop". The group also discussed *Bus Drivers Transit/School* with nontraditional hours. Job applicants lack of skills and training, don't realize what the job takes. These jobs have difficult work conditions, difficult clients and can be physically demanding. There are tough pre-employment requirements and testing involved for these jobs. The job readiness and lack of career focus was also discussed for these occupations.

The South region's group discussed root causes involving *Long Haul Truck Driver*. The group saw as a major root cause as poor pay and benefits and high travel expenses. Deregulation

keeps the market very competitive which allows drivers to switch to different jobs easily. The group also discussed a lack of awareness of job requirements/realities of job by job applicants. Students don't realize the stress of the job until they actually drive for awhile. Training is short because of time; cost and enrollment numbers are high so students don't get the full picture of the job. Experienced truck drivers do not wish to mentor or coach new drivers because they feel that the new drivers are competition and there is no incentive involved. The high stress of the job is affected by too much time away from family and friends, safety, weather, city driving, tight deadlines, IDOT rules and regulations. Illinois has fees and taxes that are not "friendly" to the trucking industry.

The South region's group discussed root causes involving *Logistics Coordinators/Outside Sales Representatives*. The group discussed the reasons that the region does not attract enough talent for these positions. We don't promote the benefits of small time living. Community Leaders haven't been thinking regionally to combine efforts to tackle the challenges the region is facing with these shortages.

The North region's group discussed root causes involving *Long and Regional Truck Drivers*. The group saw as a major root cause the difficult lifestyle the job requires. Drivers are away from home for long periods of time, which is efficient and cost effective for truck operators. Customers of the industry demand this level of efficiency and cost. Just in time inventory techniques used in retail and manufacturing industries demand this level of service. The job involves an unhealthy lifestyle, sitting for long hours causes obesity and diabetes. Limited place to park/stop on the road and often expensive food make for a difficult lifestyle. The group discussed DOT regulations affect on the job's difficult requirements. Logbook requirements, increased wait time and reduces flexibility, 25-26 minimum age requirement all contribute to on the job difficulties. The pool of younger drivers is not as strong as it could be, as many people have selected jobs in different industry. Job applicants are unaware of job realities and requirements. Truck driving is not a high profile career; existing truck drivers don't "talk up" this career. Many in the public have an outdated view of this career because of movies/media created image. There are limited opportunities for gaining experience in driving because of minimum age restrictions 25 – 26 and liability concerns.

The North region's group discussed root causes involving *Diesel Technicians*. The group saw as a major root cause lack of awareness of jobs available. The public knowledge of this occupation is lost under the term "mechanic". There is limited vocational education in high schools for this occupation and the availability of vocational education teachers is a problem. Finding qualified individuals for these teaching jobs is difficult because they can make more money working in industry. These jobs are underappreciated by school counselors who focused on college prep. Truck operators are not connecting with school counselors.

Conclusions

Over all the focus group discussions of root causes in general was in agreement with the results of the business survey and other research conducted by the Initiative. The group's focused in many cases on more detail occupational titles then used in shortage estimates from the business survey, with very specific root causes for some of these shortages. But generally the main themes of the focus group discussion centered on: awareness issues involving the shortage occupations

and industries; the need for job readiness and soft skill training for job applicants; efforts needed to promote the advantages of living and working in the region; and need for Industry collaboration.