



## New Credentials to Help U.S. Employers Recruit, Retain

Recruiting and retaining entry-level employees can be difficult because these prospective workers often have limited work histories, and their educational credentials don't always translate into usable skills. But the United States Chamber of Commerce and ACT are out to change that with the introduction of portable readiness credentials designed to help pinpoint candidates who are right for the job.

ACT, which provides educational and workforce development services and is best known for its college entrance exams, introduced the National Career Readiness Certificate in 2006. For several years, the organization had been working with several states to create credentials based on ACT's WorkKeys program—an assessment system that measures practical competencies.

According to Don Carstensen, vice president for business development at

ACT, the decision to create a nationwide certificate was inspired by a business that wanted a uniform credential for all states in which it operated. Fourteen states are currently affiliated with the program, and another seven are preparing to offer the credential through community colleges, one-stop career centers, and the Internet.

The assessment measures participants in three skill areas that are crucial to most jobs: applied mathematics, reading for information, and locating information. Depending on their performance, participants may receive either a gold, silver, or bronze certificate. ACT maintains a database of job types and the certificate level required to fulfill the job requirements. In addition, ACT maintains an online job bank on which employers can post jobs and search the database for candidates with the appropriate

certificate level. Carstensen estimates that nearly 100,000 individuals have received certificates during the last five years. While most people seeking the certificate are relatively new to the workplace, Carstensen also believes it will be useful for transitional employees seeking to verify skills they highlight on their résumés.

Last year, the National Work Readiness Council, a not-for-profit partnership of public and private sector organizations working with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, developed the National Work Readiness Credential in response to organizations' requests for a way of measuring and evaluating soft skills important to business. The 2.5-hour online assessment consists of four modules—reading comprehension, math for decision making, oral language test, and situational judgment—which in turn measure nine skills determined to be necessary for entry-level workforce success. The credential is based on the National Institute of Literacy's 10-year applied learning standards development initiative, Equipped for the Future.

Education and training providers at 95 assessment sites scattered among 19 states currently administer the test. Of the 1,400 people who have taken the exam, only 30 percent have received a credential.

Louis Soares, executive director of the National Work Readiness Council, says the test is a rigorous measurement of the soft skills that businesses need.

"They reflect both the need for business people to have a measure they can trust and integrate into their recruitment and development systems, and the desire for job seekers to assure [employers] that they have relevant skills to be successful," he adds.

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