

Case Study

Able Manufacturing & Assembly Assesses Applicant Abilities with ACT Solutions

March 2013

THE EMPLOYER

Able Manufacturing & Assembly, LLC
Joplin, Missouri

THE CHALLENGE

Transform hiring practices to identify applicants with essential skills

THE SOLUTION

With assistance from the local Workforce Investment Board (WIB), implement a comprehensive, multicomponent solution to match applicant skill levels with specific position requirements:

- Job profiling to create a detailed task/skill analysis of key positions
- ACT WorkKeys® assessments
- ACT National Career Readiness Certificates (NCRC™) preferred for all applicants

THE RESULTS

- Improved hiring efficiency because the local Workforce Investment Board helps screen applicants based on test scores and certificate levels
- Enhanced confidence in matching applicant skill levels to the requirement of each job
- Ability to document workforce skill levels for ISO 9001 quality certification
- Reduced turnover
- Increased commitment of workers
- Contribution to Jasper County's quest to become a Certified Work Ready Community to aid economic development

OVERVIEW

When it was founded in 1954 as Able Body, the company manufactured components for specialty truck bodies. Today, the company is a full-service supplier specializing in light metal fabrication and welding, thermoform plastic production, fiberglass fabrication, product assembly, and finish paint for major original equipment manufacturers. Able Manufacturing operates three plants—two in Joplin, Missouri, and one in Pittsburg, Kansas—commanding 450,000 square feet of manufacturing space, nearly the equivalent of 10 football fields.

“Many of our products support the mass transit market,” says Susan Adams, director of human resources at Able Manufacturing. “We make components for subway cars in New York City and Chicago, and we also make the nose cones for wind turbines. We make specialty cabs for equipment like construction cranes, trash trucks, and agriculture



and mining vehicles. Some of our customized vehicle cabs have more than 2,500 subcomponents and require individual customization. We use robotics and CNC—computer numerically controlled—equipment, and most orders and instructions are computerized.”

Customers include large, multinational firms such as Siemens Corporation, Kawasaki, Caterpillar, Bombardier, and Case New Holland. Able Manufacturing is privately held, employs 350 nonunion workers, and is a member of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers (AEM).

THE CHALLENGE

Management wanted to ensure that applicants for key positions, including cab assemblers and paint department employees, have the foundational skills needed to learn the specifics of the job. Because Able Manufacturing plants are within 10 miles of the Missouri state line and about a third of the workforce lives in Kansas and Oklahoma, management prefers to have all applicants assessed with the same standardized tools.

FINDING A SOLUTION

“We had been using a preemployment skills test to measure light industrial skills,” recalls Adams, “but when our local Career Center adopted ACT WorkKeys assessments and the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate in 2008, we followed suit.”

“The Southwest Missouri Workforce Investment Board, our local WIB here in Joplin, has been a wonderful partner,” she adds. “They are able to do the proctored testing at no cost to area job seekers. Their staff is basically an extension of my human resources staff, saving my company time and cost.”

Troy Roland, a business team leader at the WIB, reassures employers in Jasper County that using ACT WorkKeys and the NCRC is not a reinvention of normal human resources practices. “You’re just adding a layer to your present system that will help guarantee you’re getting a qualified worker at the start rather than trying to guess if a candidate is the right one for your open position.”

Jasen Jones, executive director at the WIB, describes his 14-person organization as a regional economic development entity. “We try to position ourselves as a valuable third-party extension for the chambers of commerce, educational institutions, economic development groups, and—of course—employers, in terms of filling skill gaps and helping grow the economy.” The WIB serves a seven-county area in southwest Missouri, where Joplin is the largest city. “We typically find out from employers what their needs are—what they struggle with—and then put together a comprehensive, customized package of HR solutions for them. ACT KeyTrain® learning modules, ACT WorkKeys assessments, and the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate are the centerpiece of the employer-driven solutions we offer,” says Jones.

The fact that both Kansas and Oklahoma are supportive of the NCRC is a benefit, says Adams. “It doesn’t really matter what state applicants may live in; if they register through a state agency in Kansas or Oklahoma or right here in Missouri, they can take their ACT WorkKeys assessments and earn the NCRC for free. And the best part is that I know they are taking the identical standardized tests, given in the same kind of proctored environment, and the credential is absolutely portable nationwide.”

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Troy Roland, business team leader,
Southwest Missouri Workforce
Investment Board

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

Adams reports that implementation was easy. “Once we were sold on ACT WorkKeys assessments and the value of the NCRC, we asked our local WIB to send one of its three ACT-authorized profilers to our site to do a detailed task and skill analysis of our assembly and paint shop positions. The resulting reports recommended the ACT WorkKeys assessments and score levels applicable to these complex jobs.”

A 25-year human resource veteran at Able Manufacturing, Adams reports that the complexity of the work has changed over time. She explains that reading and math skills are essential, and that because work instructions are online today, the ability to find information is critical. Employees must go to a computer monitor near their workstation to look up specific customization options for the unit they are producing or assembling. Painters must be able to calculate formulas for the specified paints. Chemical use, sometimes involving hazardous substances, requires special handling and care. Computer literacy is more important than ever before. Observation skills are key, because many jobs are learned by watching a more senior worker demonstrate the sequence of actions required to complete a task.

“Just as important as these cognitive skills,” says Adams, “is the ability to make decisions on the job. We follow a mantra of safety, quality, service, and cost. If an employee must make a judgment call, we encourage each individual to ask ‘Is this safe? If so, will it affect quality? If it passes both those tests, then is it going to affect service? And finally, will it affect cost?’ So critical thinking skills are a big part of keeping our customers delighted with our products.”

OUTCOMES

Adams says that because the NCRC has been embraced by employers in the region, “it’s more common to see an applicant on our doorstep with a certificate than one without. That makes the hiring process a lot more efficient for us. A ‘casual’ job seeker who isn’t willing to put in the time and effort to earn a certificate is much less likely to be considered.”

Adams believes that the turnover rate has slowed since the company began giving preference to applicants who have earned the NCRC. “One of the most important benefits for us is that as an ISO 9002-certified company, we can use the NCRC results of our workers as proof of their skill levels.”

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

According to both Adams and Jones, a robust relationship links area educators, chambers of commerce, nonprofit organizations, and employers. “The linkages we established years ago serve us well,” states Adams.

Those cooperative relationships became particularly important when Joplin was struck by a catastrophic EF5 tornado on May 22, 2011, causing nearly \$6 billion in damages, killing 158 people, and injuring more than 1,000. Nearly 7,000 homes were destroyed, and another 850 were damaged. Adams says that every aspect of the community was affected in one way or another. She reports that because all of these various agencies had worked together for years to make positive changes in the community, they were better equipped to handle the disruptions as well as the overwhelming influx of volunteers and donations.

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Susan Adams, director of human resources, Able Manufacturing

The Certified Work Ready Community status gives our region the opportunity to stand out from other communities. If a business, small or large, is thinking of relocating or expanding, they need to know that Jasper County has a certified workforce that is ready, willing, and able to go to work.

Susan Adams, director of human resources, Able Manufacturing

Jones recalls, “Because we had partnerships in place with educators, civic organizations, and economic developers, we were able to get mobilized in a matter of hours. Massive cleanup activities were put in motion much more quickly because we already knew each other and knew how to work together.”

Able Manufacturing had a small warehouse that was not in use and offered it as an intake center for contributions. The training rooms at Able were converted to a distribution center for several months, and volunteers from all over the nation showed up each day to assist.

Today, despite the devastation and the remarkable rebuilding efforts still underway, the county where Joplin is located has accomplished something no other county in Missouri can claim: Jasper County was named the first county in the state to achieve Certified Work Ready Community status by ACT. As stated on the Missouri Work Ready Community website, this designation can help transform a community’s economy and give it a competitive advantage in expanding existing businesses and attracting new businesses and jobs.

Each county must meet target goals to achieve Work Ready status, including a certain number of individuals obtaining the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate and a set number of employers who recognize, prefer, or require the NCRC as a component in hiring. “We see this as a way to raise the competitive value of an entire community,” says Jones. “In fact, we envision establishing Work Ready Corridors along Interstate 44 and 49, involving a broad swath of southwest Missouri and neighboring states.”

Adams, who is a member of the WIB, adds, “The Certified Work Ready Community status gives our region the opportunity to stand out from other communities. If business leaders are thinking of relocating or expanding their operations—small or large—they need to know that Jasper County has a certified workforce that is ready, willing, and able to go to work.”

NEXT STEPS

Able Manufacturing plans to do more job profiling to gain the same detailed skill analysis data on more positions at their plants. Adams would like to implement testing for incumbent workers seeking a transfer or promotion within Able. “I think it’s important that we continue to connect individuals needing skill development to the agencies who can help them improve their skill levels through the use of tools such as ACT KeyTrain materials.” She also plans to continue her advocacy for job profiling, ACT WorkKeys assessments, the NCRC, and Jasper County’s Certified Work Ready Community status.

Jones outlines his priorities for the future:

- Implement ACT WorkKeys testing in area high schools, starting with career and technical education programs and progressing to all students in all secondary schools.
- Promote job profiling with area employers to improve hiring success by matching the right applicants with the right skills for open positions.
- Advance Certified Work Ready Community initiatives in the six remaining counties served by the WIB.
- Continue to promote the addition of ACT soft skills assessments to increase the number of NCRC Plus certificate holders in the area. Currently, about 22% of Jasper County NCRC holders have the NCRC Plus, which includes the ACT WorkKeys Talent assessment to measure work-related attitudes and behaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jones emphasizes that successful implementation depends on employer demand. “If area businesses and organizations are recognizing, preferring, or even requiring the NCRC or NCRC Plus of applicants based on job profiles, then you’ll see what we’re seeing in our area—applicants *know* they need to take the assessments and earn credentials before the door will open for them.”

Roland, a business outreach team leader at the WIB, puts it this way: “If I walk into a prospective employer and I have a nice resume that says my mom likes me, I’m Grandma’s favorite, and my dog really appreciates me, the employer would still be asking whether I can do the job. But if I walk in and hand them a Gold-level NCRC that says I have the necessary foundational skills for 93% of the jobs in the ACT JobPro® database, they’ll know something about what I have to offer. And if I’m the hiring manager, I can tell my boss that applicants with credentials can help lower attrition and reduce training costs. Basically, I can make a case for improving the company’s bottom line. Now that’s a powerful argument for any business manager.”

HONORS

Able Manufacturing received Missouri’s 2012 “Breaking Traditions” Employer of the Year Award. This honor recognizes employer support of nontraditional career programs and nontraditional employees. Nontraditional careers are occupations in which one gender comprises less than 25 percent of the individuals employed in that field.

Also in 2012, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon awarded a “Flag of Freedom” Award to Able Manufacturing for its work with the Show-Me Heroes program designed to help connect military veterans to jobs.

In January 2013, The Manufacturing Institute, Society of Manufacturing Engineers, University of Phoenix, and Deloitte announced the inaugural list of recipients of “Women in Manufacturing STEP” (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Production) Awards. Recipients were recognized for significant achievements in manufacturing through positive impact on their company and the industry. Susan Adams of Able Manufacturing was one of the 122 women across the nation so honored.

INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS STORY

Kevin Reaves is one of 23 military veterans Able Manufacturing has hired since 2010 under the Missouri Show-Me Heroes program, designed to connect veterans to jobs when they return from active service. Reaves served as an avionics technician in the US Navy.

“I needed a way to help translate my skills to a civilian job,” says Reaves. “Taking the ACT WorkKeys assessments and earning the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate helped me do just that.”

Reaves says that he knew if he wanted to get a good job with the better employers in the Joplin area, he would need the NCRC. “It’s pretty well known in this area that some of the most reputable employers—the companies everyone wants to work for—require or request the NCRC before they’ll schedule an interview.”

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Troy Roland, business team leader,
Southwest Missouri Workforce
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The Silver-level certificate Reaves earned helped him find a challenging assembly position at Able Manufacturing. He assembles cabs for specialty vehicles used in industries like construction, mining, and agriculture.

"The ACT WorkKeys assessments were a real eye-opener. I believe they helped me demonstrate my capabilities in a way that employers understand. It was exciting to find out how my skill levels applied to civilian jobs. I definitely recommend that veterans earn the NCRC. It will benefit them."

