

# Workforce-development sessions satisfy employers

By  
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PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO / BUILDING SKILLS:

The Dean Hotel in Providence recently enrolled some of its employees in a Core Skills Partnership program funded by a Real Pathways Rhode Island grant from the Governor’s Workforce Board. From left, Aarin Clemons, general manager; Hector Melendez, lead houseman; and Janet Norena, room attendant.

For Aarin Clemons, managing downtown Providence’s The Dean Hotel – what he called “a hotel for Providence by Providence” – means employing people of all skill levels.

Often, this requires providing workforce-development sessions, and from November to February four of his 15 employees participated in a Core Skills Partnership Real Pathways Rhode Island workshop – a division of the Governor’s Workforce Board launched in April 2017.

Clemons said he identified “a clear need to have more communication and empowerment of our heart-of-house staff” – those workers without whom the hotel could not operate.

In partnership with Real Pathways, Clemons built a curriculum tailored to the hotel’s needs, including English language learning classes as well as hospitality jargon and skills. Clemons said he knows his employees understand the job, but he wanted to empower them by removing obstacles blocking communication in the hierarchical employment ladder.

A “language barrier,” said Clemons, “doesn’t mean they don’t understand the job and couldn’t teach me a few things.”

Clemons said upon completion his employees were “a lot more communicative and willing to share ideas.”

In June, CSP was one of 14 partnerships awarded Real Pathways grants to help skill up Rhode Island’s workforce. These programs, according to the Real Pathways grant description, target “populations with traditional barriers to employment,” including English language learners, veterans, homeless individuals and the long-term unemployed by providing “demand-driven” services.

One year after Real Pathways’ launch – which marked an expansion of state-sponsored workforce-development options – is what’s provided what’s needed?

The “genesis” of Real Pathways, said Governor’s Workforce Board Executive Director Heather W. Hudson, is rooted in requests fielded by the state from employers seeking to “diversify their talent,” paired with the fact that Rhode Island is facing a challenge when it comes to

identifying individuals looking for work who have all the necessary skills.

“A lot of people need additional training and support,” said Hudson.

She explained Real Pathways partnerships prepare the state’s “middle-skilled adults,” including 75,000 Rhode Islanders who lack a high school diploma, for the jobs created by its sister program, Real Jobs Rhode Island.

Robert Kalaskowski, chief of policy and planning for the GWB, said Real Pathways provides tailored workforce-development sessions fit to each employer’s needs.

So far, businesses are mostly satisfied with this bespoke approach.

Clemons’ involvement in the CSP sessions was his first use of state-sponsored workforce development, and he characterized the experience as “very promising.”

Currently, the demographics represented in Clemons’ employee base are covered by state offerings, he said. In fact, Dean Hotel launched a second round of CSP classes in February.

However, he believes more will be needed in the future and suggested, for example, a broader focus to include skills for first-time managers.

“More subsidized courses would go a long way to boosting [the number of] jobs” in Rhode Island, he said, adding a larger pool of workforce-development options is “a win-win for the job market.”

Beth Proctor, human resources director at The Brickle Group, a Woonsocket-based textile manufacturer, said “more options are always wonderful” but she is generally satisfied by what the state offers.

For at least her four years at Brickle, Proctor said the firm has worked with the R.I. Department of Labor and Training to skill up incumbent workers – most recently enrolling 15 of the company’s total 115 full-time and fluctuating 20 to 60 temporary workers in ELL and business communication classes with CSP.

Her satisfaction, she said, lies in the ability to host state-trained workforce-development coaches in-house, teach employees on Brickle-owned equipment and have a hand in designing the curriculum.

“There isn’t a lack of training in any particular area because we can determine [what’s taught],” she said.

Proctor wonders, however, how long this type of individualized programming can last. Her concern, she said, “is if the funding starts to dry up,” a factor that would “hinder” Brickle’s workforce-development initiative.

Calling the implementation of workforce development “expensive,” Proctor said when developing a new program, “the first thing we do is look to the state to see if there are funds that will help us afford to do this for our employees.”

While Clemons and Proctor implement in-house workforce development, other companies, such as Gilbane Building Co., can afford to commit more of its resources to such endeavors. In fact, by Gilbane’s count, it oversaw more than 85,000 training hours in 2017, representing 30-plus hours per employee.

John Sinnott, Gilbane vice president and business unit leader of Rhode Island, said he is “pleased” by the direction the state is taking in its expansion of workforce-development offerings. However, he feels there remains a lot of work on behalf of the state to properly connect trainees with employers.

He, like Clemons and Proctor, is optimistic about what’s to come: “We’re not in a perfect world yet, but at least we have a lot of people trying to row in the same direction.”

- **TAGS**
- Aarin Clemons
- Beth Proctor
- Brickle Group
- Core Skills Partnership
- Dean Hotel
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- Heather W. Hudson
- John Sinnott
- R.I. Department of Labor and Training
- Real Jobs Rhode Island
- Real Pathways
- Robert Kalaskowski