



Cook County's workforce competes globally; here's how to train it

By: TONI PRECKWINKLE December 17, 2014

Cook County is vital to the economic prosperity of our region, but until recently it hasn't fully assumed its role as an economic driver. We have a responsibility to work with both the government and private sectors to enhance the northeastern Illinois region's strength and competitiveness.

As president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, it has been my mission to improve the credibility and capacity of county government. First, we put our fiscal house in order. Then we sought the necessary expertise, appointing a Council of Economic Advisors, to help shape our regional strategy. We now are better equipped to be a leader in advocating, organizing and partnering across the region to promote economic growth.

I began by rebuilding the county's relationships with other regional governments. Last December, I convened a meeting with the chief executives, economic development professionals and business leaders of the seven counties of northeast Illinois and the city of Chicago to explore opportunities for collaboration.

As I move into my second term, I am focused on continuing to build the cross-sector partnerships necessary to drive regional growth.

I'm grateful to count on private-sector experience in colleagues, staff and the advisory councils. But our current challenge is more fully engaging the business community in our efforts around workforce development.

DEVELOPING THE WORKFORCE

In 2012, I partnered with Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the city of Chicago to transform our workforce development system. We created the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership by streamlining our three local workforce boards (and the nonprofit Chicago Workforce Investment Council) into one county organization, providing us with the foundation to strategically expand the reach of the region's employment and training services.

Historically, most public dollars spent on workforce development were focused on assisting individuals who faced challenges finding work. But, as the economy has changed, the face of the individuals we serve has changed as well. Few people remain in one job, in one company for their entire working life anymore. With advancing technology and a changing economy, workers need to upgrade their skills constantly. We need a workforce development system that is capable of keeping up with these changing demands.

There is no better way to understand and address these changes than to connect businesses with the schools and training facilities. This is important to ensure that our workers acquire the different skills they will need over the course of their working lives—it's key to keeping our region globally competitive. If businesses don't have skilled workers, and if workers don't have needed skills, we lose our ability to remain globally competitive.

This may sound illogical—but with more than 600 workforce boards in the United States, studies show that only 13 percent of the nation's businesses actually are engaged with their region's federally funded workforce resources.

We want to ensure that every person has the ability to build a career and that every business has the talent it needs to grow and compete in a global economy. The only way we can do this is by creating a smarter workforce system that can respond to the unique needs of our region. That means coordinating our resources and programs so that they're all working together toward the same goals and using the same metrics for success. This not only reduces administrative costs but also ensures that our workforce system is actually

working for our economy of today and tomorrow.

In short, we need to hear from you: Reach out to the Cook County **Bureau of Economic Development** and our **Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership** to learn more.

***Toni Preckwinkle** is president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners.*
