

MAKING SMARTT CONNECTIONS

A new tool links talent with area businesses

Somewhere, there is a Chippewa Valley native who wants to come home.

And all around the Chippewa Valley are companies that want to fill key positions with someone who is likely to stick around for a while. To bring those people together is one of the goals behind the Smartt Network, a new online talent management tool developed by the Eau Claire Area Economic Development Corporation.

The project is in its infancy, being launched in November. The ultimate goals are to help companies meet their needs to recruit new talent and at the same time provide an avenue by which talent can return to or stay in the Chippewa Valley.

In this way, the program can stimulate business growth, help early-stage businesses, and build connections between businesses and talent outside the area.

"Having been a Chamber and EDC director in other areas and having heard the recruitment needs of businesses in this region, I've seen the limitations that existing tools have," said Brian Doudna, executive director of the Eau Claire EDC. "The SMARTT Network is really focused on relationship building.

"In addition to current residents, we're reaching out to individuals who grew up in western Wisconsin, went to college here, or have some other personal connection. Those are the people most likely to return and stay for the right opportunity when it becomes available."

Smartt genesis

The concept started with focus groups in 2005, according to Doudna. The EDC was looking for what area businesses needed, and what would help them grow and thrive in the Valley.

"There were real concerns about the ability to recruit the talent that drives those businesses," Doudna said.

And it wasn't just a matter of keeping the computer programmers and electrical engineers away from big jobs in the Silicon Valley.

"It was across the board, not just technical," Doudna said.

Aging baby boomers and the resulting increased number of retirees was creating a growing need for talent to replace them.

"Even if we had no new jobs created," said Doudna, shuddering to think about that scenario, "we will have to recruit to fill baby boomer vacancies."

Often companies are able to find talent, but talent that sees jobs at local companies as a stepping stone to better jobs elsewhere. The result is a revolving door of talent, stopping by in the Valley, then moving on. And companies were paying search firms big bucks to bring in that temporary talent.

"If people are not from the Midwest, or don't have roots here, the recruitment is generally not a long-term solution," Doudna said.

For a solution, the EDC looked west to a model in use in the entertainment industry, where talented people have many short-term jobs on movie sets and other projects. Recruiters

looking for certain talent could search a data base of who was available at that time.

So how about a data base of talent that has a reason to want to stay here, or move back here?

How it works

There are two sides to every recruitment effort, of course, so the Smartt Network has something to offer for both potential employees of Valley businesses and the companies in need of talent.

On the business side, the EDC partnered with some of the University of Wisconsin campuses at Eau Claire, Stout and River Falls, as well as Chippewa Valley Technical College. Businesses like Hutchinson Technology, Commonwealth Development, Manpower, Realityworks, Luther Midelfort, KRM Information Systems and Phillips Plastics were also early to sign on, and helped with development to ensure it would be a tool that could work for them.

The universities and technical college were particularly key, as their network of alumni provides a data base from which to recruit the other side of the equation: Essential to the network is a database of talent.

The idea is for talent to create profiles of themselves, listing their educational background, industry experience, specific skill sets, certifications, and licenses, leadership roles and professional accomplishments.

The system is not just for top positions. Everyone from truck drivers and manufacturing workers to medical professionals and computer designers will be part of the data base.

The profiles are at first anonymous. Potential employers know only about the skills and background, not the identity or contact information of people in the data base.

Companies looking for talent search for people with the skill sets they're looking for. If they find someone they want to contact, they pay a fee for the contact.

There are different levels of subscription to the service, from a complete subscriber for total access to a per-contact fee.

Appealing concept

The reception to the program so far has been positive.

"The connection to the community, the ability to build relationships and the ability to act when the opportunity is right are the key things to me," said Teresa Ritzinger, HR Director at HTI. Ritzinger notes that her greatest recruitment successes have been with people who have previous ties to the community.

Another element of the Network that appeals to her, said Ritzinger, is the ability to connect with passive candidates. "I want to attract people who are already employed," she admits. "But how do I even know they're looking?"

The Smartt Network helps candidates find opportunities while maintaining confidentiality. It provides the ability to create profiles that focus on specific skills.

"It's also an economic development tool to help grow companies and help people realize



On the talent side, creating a profile is free and easy in the Smartt Network. Users select skills, industry and degrees, but no information gives away the person's identity. This graphic shows part of the profile creation process.

their personal and professional goals," said Doudna.

Scott Hodek, with the Department of Workforce Development, said this would have been a great tool for him not that long ago.

"I moved to Oregon and worked there as an economist for a couple of years and then decided to come back," he said. "If I had had a resource like (the Smartt Network) it would have made coming back to the Midwest a lot easier."

Another component to the system is a newsletter to help connect people outside the area who still have ties here with what's going on in the business community back home, even if they are not looking to change jobs at this time.

That not only plants the seeds for future relocations, but helps foster relationships between Valley businesses and businesses elsewhere that are employing people with roots here.

"The goal is to establish relationships, whether they sign up for the database or not," Doudna said.

Just getting started

It's hard to say how long it will take before the Smartt Network is "fully functional" - that is, has a broad data base and a broad range of businesses seeking contacts through it. The marketing efforts are just getting underway.

But Doudna hopes that after a decade or more the system will not just be connecting Valley businesses and available talent, but help Valley companies develop new product lines by bringing in or retaining the talent that can foster new product growth.

That kind of long-term goal aside, Doudna expects the system to be useful to employers and talent in the first quarter of this year.

Finding new ways to make connections is only good business. Smartt business. ▲

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FOR MORE INFO

To learn more about the Smartt program and how to get involved, contact the Eau Claire EDC at (715) 834-0070 or visit www.smarttnetwork.com.

