

THE SKILLS GAP – we can win this...actually, we have to

The critical need for career & technical education and professional development

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I drove from Washington, D.C. to New York recently. It's a very easy 4.5-hour drive. As I approached New York, the gasoline light in my car lit up indicating that in order for me to reach my destination, I would need to-

- Trust the light is accurate;
- Acknowledge that my car needed gas; and
- Take the steps necessary to ensure the car received the gas it requires

Well...the United States is on a journey, too. We as a nation are driving toward a destination. Just as the gasoline indicator in my car came on...the nation's skills gap light has been activated, warning us that we need fuel for future career & technical education and professional development. In order for the nation to reach its destination, we need to sincerely recognize and acknowledge the critical need for career and technical education and professional development and take the steps necessary to resolve the problem quickly or we will run out of skilled workers.

The concept as well as the issues involved in the "skills gap" are not hard to understand...in fact, statistically they are quite simple. The nation suffers from chronic unemployment...11 million unemployed with four million jobs sitting unfilled. The nation simply does not have the skilled workers to fill the demand. However, that's where the simplicities end and the complexities begin. Add to the equation a constant shift in the nation's labor markets and a sluggish economy that is in a perpetually defensive mode, and the issues of the skills gap begins to take on many, many moving parts. I would argue that at the heart of the problem (and perhaps the chief culprit), is a sense of national unawareness and a lack of national focus and game plan.

As an industry, many of the issues we deal with have built-in support and/or opposition...we either favor something or we don't...we either agree with something or we don't...we either have friends or enemies. But, when it comes to our concern about training and finding qualified workers, there is no opposition. Again, at the heart of the problem is a sense of national unawareness and a lack of national focus and game plan.

While it's true that the skills gap is a result of many factors including:

- a lack of foundational skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics
- unemployed older workers
- lack of job training, and
- poor career credentialing

an overall national game plan to address the skills gap is crucial.

The good news is that there is an answer and the beauty of it is that the members of PHCC as well as the entire plumbing, heating, cooling industry will be part of the solution and will offer an important component to resolve the issue. PHCC, as well as a myriad of industries, are structuring a comprehensive national educational campaign on the skills gap for Congress. There is no overnight fix to this issue but we began to take the first right step in the first right direction at the recent PHCC 2014 Legislative Conference. PHCC's support for the Carl D. Perkins Act (a program to support the development of academic and career technical skills among secondary and postsecondary education students who elect to enroll in career and technical education programs)

was a strategic action which plays into a building national effort to address the many components of the skills gap.

As we've said many times before, the plumbing, heating, cooling industry has a beautiful story to tell in terms of its great contributions to communities, consumers, local/state/national economies, and the job markets. The fact is that this industry has the ability to not just offer jobs, but careers. This is exactly what is needed to close the gap between skills and demand and is exactly what the skills gap is looking for.

We are at the beginning of a national push to educate lawmakers, policy decision makers, business professionals, as well as the American people on the career opportunities of this industry and the ways in which it directly impacts the skills gap. A growing national awareness is beginning as indicated from-

- The Administration's announcement that it will invest in grant programs to bring academic institutions and businesses closer together to help prepare the American workforce for jobs that may otherwise go unfilled;
- Legislation to offer tax credits to employers encouraging them to hire apprentices; and
- Continued funding for secondary and postsecondary education for career and technical education.

In addition, PHCC is active within the industry with various programs to help us rebuild the workforce we need to continue to provide safe and efficient plumbing and HVACR services for our country. As one example, PHCC's involvement with the HVACR Workforce Development Foundation supports projects, programs and partnerships that support the recruitment of the next generation of skilled workers. And, a special PHCC task force will begin work soon on workforce development planning to attract qualified workers to our industry.

The skills gap is an extremely complex issue with many moving parts. However, we are moving in the right direction as an industry, and the right direction as a nation.