

No jobs out there, you think? Think again.

The High Country Workforce Board is making it a whole lot easier to hire and be hired

By Sally Treadwell

Perry Lyon used to be a textile worker, which pretty much says it all—more than 100,000 textile workers have been laid off since 2001 in North Carolina alone. Lyon watched as close to 1,500 fellow employees got their pink slips, and in early 2010 he got his own. After 28 years.

Meanwhile, Dorsett Technologies was carefully considering its hiring and expansion options. Because it creates automatic monitoring systems for NASA, military bases and municipal water and wastewater plants, the recession hasn't been a problem, but Dorsett's highly specific and detailed systems require a huge investment in training for new employees.

"It's been difficult to find talent for the business we're in," says Fred Trivette, Dorsett's VP of Operations. "If I had to train someone from scratch, it would take up to two years before they started making us money."

Then Trivette got a call from Ricky Roten at the area JobLink Center. Would Dorsett be interested in someone who qualified for an On-the-Job Training (OJT) grant funded through the High Country Workforce Development Board?

Roten thought that with training, Lyon could be a good fit for Dorsett. He'd been having no luck with his job search although, says Roten, "he was really dedicated to finding another job. He worked extensively with a counselor at the Wilkes JobLink career center to develop his resume and interview skills and zero in on any potential job."

At just 52 the former project manager had been told "more than once" that he was too old; there were huge numbers of applicants for every job going. As the weeks wore on Lyon had become long-term unemployed, which made his search even harder. According to recent testimony before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, few businesses will now even consider hiring anyone who's been out of work for a while.

Trivette interviewed Lyon and found that his electrical skills were a good basis for a job as project manager. But just as important—perhaps more important—were his work ethic and attitude.

"There are a lot of people who want jobs, but not that many who want to work," says Trivette, who has already promoted Lyon after just a few months. "He's done well primarily because of his desire to do well. I wish I had twenty Perrys. We'd get a lot done."

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 awarded a \$500,000 grant to the High Country Workforce Development Board. The funding must be used to subsidize On-the-Job Training for workers affected by plant closures and mass layoffs; individuals who have been unemployed long-term (more than 19 weeks) can up-skill and re-skill while earning a regular

paycheck. Employers can use the subsidies to fuel growth by creating jobs and training people to fill them now, instead of waiting for the economy to improve.

The grants reimburse employers for as much as 90 percent of the trainee's paycheck, depending on skill gaps and the employer's company size. Grants last for up to six months and trainee positions must be intended to lead to a permanent job.

"Yes, there's still some grant money available," says Roten. He uses Prove-It software to assess skill bases and looks for OJT candidates who, like Perry, are serious and open to training. While many employers haven't yet heard of the program, "every company we've done a contract with has been interested in doing another one. Most of the costs that make them nervous about hiring new people come in the initial months."

Both Trivette and Lyon are enthusiastic about the program.

"Training costs a lot," notes Trivette, "and a dollar saved in training is a dollar we can invest in growth. We're expanding in three states. If this hadn't come up, I'd have had to broaden the search, and we like local people because we don't do short-term positions. We want to retain employees and offer them a good career."

"It's definitely been a learning curve," says Perry, who clearly revels in the challenge of overseeing the customized design and installation of Dorsett's SCADA systems. "As soon as I master one piece of the puzzle, here comes another to learn."

He's grateful for the opportunity the OJT scheme has given him. "17 of us went out at the same time. Very few have gone back to work."

Can your company benefit from an OJT grant?

On-the-Job training grants are available to businesses hiring eligible workers with a significant skill gap. The grants are intended to be the impetus for creating job opportunities now, while strengthening business productivity and growth.

50-90 percent of wages during a training period may be reimbursed for up to 6 months (1040 hours) depending on the size of the company and the skill gap.

The wage and benefit package must be the same as that of employees in the same position.

Reimbursement is capped at 90 percent of the state average wage, \$18.95 in NC.

Employment must be for at least 32 hours per week and intended to be permanent. Monthly time cards and evaluations must be submitted for reimbursement.

Eligible job seekers are carefully evaluated and given career counseling to ensure a good fit.

Are you eligible for OJT?

On-the-Job training is intended for dislocated workers, self-employed workers unemployed because of natural disasters or general economic conditions in the community, and displaced homemakers. It's a learn-and-earn program.

Interested?

Contact: Ricky Roten, Business Services Representative
Wilkes, Ashe, Alleghany JobLink Career Center
336-651-2540 ext. 2550 or Ricky.Roten@wilkescc.edu



Perry Lyon (l), a former textile worker, now oversees the installation of customized monitoring systems for Dorsett Technologies, which designs and manufactures both the software and the hardware for the systems. An On-the-Job Training grant made it possible for Fred Trivette (r) to give him the necessary training.