

Reaching out beyond borders



Regional collaborations break down barriers to help build workforce, economy in northeast Wisconsin – New North B2B

Story by Lee Marie Reinsch

February 2017

A few generations ago, our ancestors might have benefited from barn raising, the tradition of building cooperatively. Friends and family for miles would volunteer their muscle, free of charge, to build a structure for their neighbor. The only labor cost was lunch for the gang and returning the favor some day. Not only would the barn be built economically, it ideally would be done in a much shorter time than the farmer building the barn alone.

When the right people collaborate to accomplish a common agenda, they can often get more done than they might alone, and the same philosophy pertains to organizations. The collaborative spirit of the barn raising is alive and well in northeast Wisconsin. Only instead of cousins and neighbors building barns, it's coalitions of groups that are creating career advancement opportunities, jobs and enhancing the economy of the region overall.

Paving the path

People don't spend all their time in the same community that they live or work. So when it comes to attracting business to the area, it makes more sense to team up with neighboring communities to form a force to be reckoned with.

That's what the members of the I-41 Corridor marketing collaborative did.

"People are traveling. We know that it's bigger than just our local communities. We know we have a strong, well-educated, highly-skilled and productive workforce we could market together, and what's good for Fond du Lac is good for Oshkosh and north and vice versa," said Rob Kleman, senior vice president of

economic development for the Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce and a member of the I-41 marketing collaborative.

The I-41 Corridor marketing collaborative consists of five economic development organizations serving communities along Interstate 41 from Fond du Lac to Green Bay. Its goal is to increase awareness of the corridor as a place to do business.

But rather than trying to attract another Dollar Tree, it aims for bigger job providers who bring dollars into the local economy, rather than churning dollars that are already here.

“Our goal is to work with primary employers – not retail, not commercial projects – although we would certainly not turn away a large retail project,” said Steve Jenkins, president of Fond du Lac County Economic Development Corp. “We’re working with those projects that have high leverage and multipliers in terms of their employment and their payroll. Our goal is to increase the wealth of the entire region by attracting good-paying jobs, particularly jobs that are in growth mode in this new economy we find ourselves in.”

The I-41 marketing collaborative is composed of Advance Economic Development, a program of Greater Green Bay Chamber; Fox Cities Regional Partnership; Greater Oshkosh Economic Development Corp.; Fond du Lac County Economic Development Corp.; and Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce.

It’s been around in varying capacities for several years, but recently rebooted under new leadership.

“We started talking about how we could collaborate because we had common interests down Highway 41,” Jenkins said. “We began to look at our commonalities and think we could have an opportunity.”

Last fall, the collaborative invited a handful of industry site selectors for a tour of the area. These scouts for companies looking to relocate or branch out to other locations affirmed the need for the collaborative.

“(Site selectors) said, ‘Look, until you start working together, we’re not going to pay attention to you because – individually, or even two communities together – you’re not going to create enough critical mass for us to go to our clients and say this would be good place to locate our business,’” Jenkins said. Collaborative members took that feedback to heart and started looking at commuting patterns for the workforce up and down the corridor.

“We all share workforce because of our close proximity to each other. We started to look at the base of advanced manufacturing that we had in the region, and each community had a significant number of advanced manufacturing operations,” Jenkins said. “It just evolved from there.”

Overall, the site selectors were impressed with what the area had to offer, Jenkins said. “Long-term, we think it will pay off.”

Next fall Fond du Lac will be the host community for these site selectors visiting the I-41 corridor.

“Their goal is to make recommendations to their clients about where the most productive location would be to build a new facility or relocate a facility,” Jenkins said. “In our profession, they’re the ones we have to work with very closely and make sure they understand what our region has to offer and build relationships with them, so that when they have a project, they have a good wealth of information about our area and can bring it to the attention of their client.”

Manufacturing talent

More than a decade ago, an equipment manufacturer in the Greater Green Bay area told Ann Franz that he had a lot of job openings at his company – and very little interest in them.

“He said to me, ‘Is there any organization out there that’s interested in trying to improve the image of manufacturing?’”

That was 2005. It wasn’t easy to get people excited about working in a manufacturing plant at the time.

“A lot of people who don’t know anyone in manufacturing still think of it as like the ‘I Love Lucy’ scene in the chocolate factory, or ‘Laverne & Shirley’ watching the bottles go past,” Franz said.

So Franz, who serves as strategic partnerships manager for Northeast Wisconsin Technical College in Green Bay, helped bring together a handful of like-minded manufacturers for a team huddle and a brainstorm. In June 2006, the Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing Alliance was formed. Through her work with NWTC, Franz serves as director of the alliance.

Manufacturers need skilled workers, and the state still has many manufacturers, despite the mindset that nothing’s made in the United States anymore. Nearly 23 percent of all jobs in northeast Wisconsin are in the manufacturing sector.

The percentage of jobs in manufacturing is more than a third lower in the rest of Wisconsin – 16 percent compared to 23 – but still higher than the national average of 9 percent, Franz said, calling northeast Wisconsin a ‘hotbed’ for manufacturing.

“They’re great-paying jobs, there’s a lot of them, and we need to help the region understand that if you want to live here and have a great life, you should consider manufacturing,” she said.

In the 10 years since its founding, the alliance has focused on bringing industry together to uncover the workforce needs of various manufacturers from the region and advocate for careers in manufacturing.

The alliance has nine task forces focusing on talent, retired workers, incumbent workers, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers, raising awareness among parents about manufacturing careers, addressing the shortage of technical college instructors and technology teachers, promoting partnerships with K-12 education, and communications.

“Our vision is that every northeast Wisconsin manufacturer will find the talent it needs,” Franz said.

The success of the alliance has bred the North Coast Marine Manufacturing Alliance, Greater Green Bay Healthcare Alliance and Northeast Wisconsin Insurance Consortium, with Franz administering all of them.

There should be an app for that

It’s said that necessity is the mother of invention. That’s the case with Northeast Wisconsin IT Alliance. A couple executives were sitting around talking about how hard it was to find IT talent in the region. So instead of just muttering ineffectually to themselves, they decided to do something about it.

They formed NEW IT Alliance to tackle the problem from the ground – or bottom of the screen – up by getting young people interested in information technology careers.

Sure, Millennials are taking over the world: they're our bankers, our website designers, our movie stars. But they're not studying the IT path in college or going into IT careers in large numbers, said Kim Iversen, director of NEW IT Alliance.

"There have been numerous studies done without any clear answers coming out of them as to why we don't see more people seeking IT careers," said Iversen. "It's a shame, because they are very lucrative." IT positions in the New North region range in salary from \$44,000 up to six figures.

Iversen has been talking with businesses and organizations across northeast Wisconsin, asking what their technology challenges are and what programs they might already have in place, such as Fox Valley Technical College's Megabites program for middle school students. She's tapped into STEM organizations in Green Bay and Oshkosh.

"We're just trying to understanding what does the picture look like today, and then start developing programs we can lead or facilitate to help encourage our youth to explore IT as a viable career, to encourage those who might be looking for a second career to explore, and ultimately even to reach out to 'boomerangers' – people who have moved out of state but are looking to come back and may want careers in IT," said Iversen.

She said the organization's mission is to increase the talent pipeline.

"Doing that is going to require collaboration by area businesses, our (state) department of workforce development, the school districts, and IT organizations such as Women in Technology," she said.

This dearth of technology talent of which she speaks isn't limited to northeast Wisconsin – it exists across the country and around the globe. But that's not to underestimate the problem here. Iversen said state economists estimate by 2020 there will be 4,000 IT positions in northeast Wisconsin that employers won't be able to fill, with another 7,000 unfilled positions in the Milwaukee area.

"As Baby Boomers retire and the demand for IT increases, so will the deficit of workers," she said. In 2021, this gap is estimated to cost \$203 million in lost income for northeast Wisconsin alone, she said.

Paving the educational path

You probably know someone who seems to be in college forever. It's easy to think they're to blame, perhaps lazy or bad at setting goals. But it could just be glitches in the system. Maybe they started a degree at a tech school, intending to finish at a four-year school, and found out they practically had to start over because many credits didn't transfer.

Northeast Wisconsin Educational Resource Alliance has endeavored to change that by making the path to success smoother with guided career pathway programs. NEW ERA is an alliance of universities and technical colleges across the region working together.

"The mission is to serve northeast Wisconsin with a seamless transition in higher education so the students and individuals of a community can have a variety of degree choices and programming that support what they'd like to do," said NEW ERA executive director Linda Bartelt.

The average student in an associate degree program takes 81 credits to finish his or her degree, when the typical requirement is 60, according to the higher education alliance Complete College America. Only

about 17 percent of associate degree students finish their degree on time. Some 22 percent take twice the usual time to get their degree. Career pathways make the process of pursuing a degree less painful.

“Students can begin at any one of the northeast Wisconsin colleges or universities and get an associate degree and move toward a bachelor’s at UW Green Bay or UW Oshkosh,” Bartelt said. “It’s making sure those transitions – as you move across the colleges and universities – are not fraught with challenges of how and what do I need to achieve this career pathway.”

NEW ERA’s most recent program offering is the engineering technology career pathway program. NEW Manufacturing Alliance has been supportive of the program.

Since the pathway was created just a few years ago, more than 200 students have enrolled in the engineering technology program.

“Students are working right side by side with operations managers and other types of individuals,” Bartelt said. “We call them the working professionals. It’s very much a hands-on professional degree.”

Similar career pathways are available for those in nursing, fire/emergency response, early childhood education and other subjects, Bartelt said. NEW ERA is working with Northeast Wisconsin IT Alliance to design a career pathway program in information technology.

Communication among faculty is crucial, and NEW ERA’s faculty dialog group meets during the school year to discuss curriculum. The group consists of about 40 educators representing each of the institutions involved in NEW ERA.

“They work together to share best practices in education as well as to ensure there’s really a quality educational experience for each student as it relates to the strength of the program and the credentialing of the program,” Bartelt said.

NEW ERA works with NEW Manufacturing Alliance to promote internships in local companies, including sponsoring its Internship Draft Day at Lambeau Field.

A new tack

Following in the footsteps of the success of NEW Manufacturing Alliance, marine builders from the region asked Northeast Wisconsin Technical College for help developing a curriculum specific to their industry. That led to the realization that the industry needed its own advocacy group, according to Ann Franz, who also directs the North Coast Marine Manufacturing Alliance in addition to NEW Manufacturing Alliance. The alliance is a partnership of the six boat, yacht and ship builders in the region: Marinette Marine, Bay Shipbuilding in Sturgeon Bay, ACE (Aluminum Center of Excellence) Marine in Green Bay, Burger Boat Co. in Manitowoc, Cruiser Yachts in Oconto and Marquis Yachts in Pulaski.

So what’s a “North Coast” and why is it in Wisconsin? Mainly to denote that the area isn’t landlocked.

“We could have called it ‘Great Lakes,’ but a lot of people think you can’t get to the ocean from a lake, and we’re trying to change the image of this area because Marinette Marine needs to get that littoral combat ship to the coast,” Franz said.

The marine alliance's initiatives include attracting and training a skilled workforce, promoting the North Coast area as a hub for marine manufacturing, developing the supply chain inside the area, and strengthening relations with industry and government relations.

Building a foundation

The Northeast Wisconsin Building & Trades Council serves as the canopy organization for 34 construction trades unions spanning across 29 counties. It encompasses practically every facet of the construction process – from boilermakers and bricklayers to roofers and carpenters. Its trade unions boast 12,000 working and retired members across the region.

The collaborative organization aims to improve wages and benefits, build communities through community and school involvement, promote apprenticeships, and work together with business owners, developers, architects, utilities and government, said Ted Gumieny, business representative for the building trades council.

According to the council, workers covered by unions earn more and have more benefits than their counterparts not covered by unions. The organization indicates 79 percent of those in unions have health insurance provided by their employers, compared to 52 percent of those not covered by unions.

“Union workers are 285 percent more likely to have defined-benefit pension plans” than those not covered by unions, Gumieny said.

One of the council's key focuses is training and advocacy for those considering careers in the construction industry.

“Apprenticeship and training and journey-worker upgrade programs benefit not only our members, but also our contractors and their customers,” said Gumieny.

One benefit unions have for employers, he said, is they reduce turnover by making worksites safer.

For the last two years, the collaboration of construction trade unions along with the Labor Management Council of Northeast Wisconsin has held a construction trades career event allowing high school students hands-on experiences in building a wall with brick and mortar, using a jackhammer, and even operating a heavy construction equipment simulator.

The second annual event last October at Shopko Hall in Green Bay drew 750 students from 30 school districts across northeast and northern Wisconsin. This year's event is scheduled for October at Central Wisconsin Expo Center in Rothschild.

Lee Marie Reinsch of Green Bay worked 18 years at daily newspapers before launching her freelance business, edgewise, in 2007.