



Employer Focus Group Outcomes

Southern California HVACR Collaborative – August 13, 2015

Background and Purpose

A group of seven colleges formed a Collaborative in the fall of 2014 to develop regional HVACR career pathways across Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties. This Collaborative is building an “employer ecosystem” that will streamline the process by which HVACR students develop required competencies and gain employment. Employers who registered as part of this ecosystem were offered a first look at all graduates of the Collaborative’s HVACR programs, giving them a recruiting advantage in a highly competitive labor market. More information can be found at:

SoCal HVACR Collaborative: <http://www.eeusector.com/initiatives/hvacr-technicians/>

Employer Ecosystem: <http://www.eeusector.com/prop-39/hvac-employers/>

On August 13, 2015, a focus group from this employer ecosystem was conducted to help shape the relationship between colleges and employers. Major objectives were to identify potential benefits for employers and students and define a structure for the program. Outcomes from this session are outlined below.

Participants

Tom Bowen, Vice President – ABM
Chris Compton, CEO – HVACRedu
Pepper Hunziker, Tre’ Laine Associates and Consultant to SCE
Don Langston, President and CEO – AirRite
Tom Morton, HVACR Recruiter – Piping Industry Progress and Education Trust Fund
Scott Oakley, Q Program Liaison – HVACRedu
Jim Caldwell, Sector Navigator – California Community Colleges (Facilitator)

Structure

Linkages with the employer ecosystem need to be structured in a way that deliver mutual benefits to employers and students. This structure could include:

A structured internship program with the California Community College Foundation as a “temp agency” and employer of record to ease payroll and workers compensation concerns.

Assistance with recruiting and job placement via the California Community College Foundation LaunchPath online resume and job matching service.

A website for workers to pursue career advancement through continuing education.

Focused enrollment strategies with local Workforce Development Boards, particularly emphasizing youth and veterans.

Employer education on workforce services associated with the employer ecosystem.

A key suggestion was to develop a well-defined partnership between employers and the Collaborative, with mutual accountability and success tracking through metrics on hiring, job performance, and career advancement. The group also identified a need for this program to demonstrate the value of a certified workforce as a business differentiator and income-builder, which suggests an additional set of metrics for business impact.

Employer Relationship

Employers are in business to generate income, and usually have little time to devote to other activities. Respecting this fact, the focus group suggested a relationship that would have individual employers committing to a level of participation that works for their business. Proposed levels of participation would include:

Putting students into jobs, specifically as paid interns, is seen as the strongest motivator for students to complete an HVACR program. It also allows the employer to evaluate the intern as a future employee and enables the student to build real-world competencies.

Employer pull-through can significantly increase student enrollment, completion, and employment. Letting students know that there are large numbers of job openings and acquainting them with specific employers can be a powerful motivator.

Employer participation in developing and executing enrollment strategies would help attract highly qualified students into HVACR programs.

It's logical to ask employers to commit to specific goals, assuring skin in the game necessary to maintain an effective ecosystem.

Resources for Students

Students need better insights into the work environment and different job functions within it. Faculty already provide many of these insights, and employers can add substantially more to student understanding of HVACR careers. Employers in the ecosystem can help prepare students for the workplace by assisting with some or all of the following:

Career pathway maps and the cohort model have proven to be effective tools for increasing program completion rates and employability. Assistance from employers would be very helpful

in creating a meaningful map of career pathways and competencies required for each position on the map.

Developing specs for qualified workers can be helpful in giving students targets to shoot for in preparing for entry into the workforce. To this end, employers could provide 1-2 job descriptions each, from which specifications could be drafted for review and approval within the employer ecosystem.

Students would benefit from “day in the life” interviews related to various job functions. These could be formatted in any number of ways, from lunch & learn sessions to employer panels to groups of students visiting employers to job shadowing. Employers could partner with faculty to write the story around situations and job tasks, further contributing context to students’ learning experiences.

A series of contractor panels could emphasize certain skills and provide reality about how these skills are applied. Important elements of these panels include:

- An integrated approach to why contractors do what they do
- Utility-side considerations as they impact energy efficiency (related to the business model for building owners and managers)
- Tie skill sets to career map and profiles of various jobs

Understanding of energy efficiency will become a greater need over time as California progresses toward a Zero Net Energy environment. Current courses could be augmented to include ACCA Joint Futures energy efficiency orientation.

Personality surveys for students such as Strengths Finders can assist in identifying career choices that best fit individual aptitudes and personalities. This self-assessment could be implemented as a standard feature early in (or even prior to) each student’s HVACR program.

Ideas for Interaction with Employers

At a minimum, registered employers will be notified as graduation approaches so each can determine how they want to approach the recruiting process. This engagement can range from “speed dating” at certain colleges to 120-hour interviews (otherwise known as internships) to interaction with students at certain momentum points such as completion of certain courses or key topics. Other ways for employers to become engaged are:

Faculty externships can steep instructors in actual applications of technology and business practices, which can be reflected in the classroom.

Some employers may want to mentor students and/or faculty, providing guidance, hands-on experience and motivation throughout the school year.

Modeling best practices and behavior will be significant as most students will emulate the employers and workers they see as examples of their future selves.

Conclusions

The employer ecosystem must be structured enough to deliver strong results while giving each employer the flexibility to interact with the Collaborative in a way that best suits their business. More dialog with registered employers is needed to further define the program.

Next Steps

Jim Caldwell will facilitate the following actions to structure the program and assure positive employer engagement:

- Email introduction to registered employers
- Follow-up phone calls to registered employers
- Work with each employer to designate a point person for their firm
- A second focus group via face-to-face meeting with registered employees
- Identify means for employers to find specific HVACR programs within the Collaborative
- Introduce a system for long-term engagement of employers and the Collaborative

Contact

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