



Balancing Present and Future Economic Needs

**EXPLORING E-LEARNING FOR RE-SKILLING
EMPLOYEES IN HIGH-TECH CAREERS**

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This year, re-skilling the workforce is the challenge that business leaders, community leaders, job seekers and workforce development professionals are facing in virtually every community in the United States.

Nowhere is the challenge more profound or more strategically defined as in Yuma County, Ariz. It faces high and rising unemployment alongside a significant number of prospective employees considered “overqualified” for existing jobs; and a systemic low skill level amid an emergent need for highly technical employees. During this recession, an already staggering level of unemployment in the county, typically running in the range of 20 percent, has moved as high as 27 percent (seasonally adjusted), as reported in the latest figures from the Arizona Department of Commerce.

Amid the ongoing challenges within Yuma County is a hopeful picture for the future. Economic development and workforce development forces have established a strong partnership, with the Greater Yuma Economic Development Corporation (GYEDC) and the Yuma Private Industry Council (YPIC) joining other partners in meeting the opportunities by re-skilling the workforce.

The YPIC — a “one-stop” delivery system for workforce development in Yuma County — has consistently practiced what it preaches. Led by executive director John Morales, president of the National Workforce Association, YPIC has been engaged in a substantial capacity-building initiative of knowledge transfer as a viable means of establishing succession planning within its own organization over the past decade. With budget reductions of 51 percent from the period of 2001-2009, YPIC began restructuring itself, preparing for its own re-skilling to arrive at a widely dispersed, forward-thinking leadership and learning in its own ranks.

KEY AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

Four key areas of development figure prominently within the region:

1 High-technology agriculture sector. The \$3.1 billion agriculture industry is a long-term presence in the county, featuring fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy products. Key corporations operating both in Yuma County and in Mexico include Dole Fresh Vegetables (in Yuma since 1993), Sarah Farms (providing some 700,000 gallons of milk to such outlets as Costco Warehouses), and McElhaney Cattle Company (a top 50 privately-held firm in Arizona).

2 Distribution and logistics. Among the primary functions being fulfilled in this arena are warehousing, transportation, distribution and international customs processing. The San Luis Commercial Port of Entry II, the new area service highway, Yuma International Airport and 10 active trucking firms furnish fluid thoroughways that facilitate the continued increase in distribution of products. In support of this beneficial venture is the Southwest Arizona Port

Users’ Association (SWAPU), an industry association of local customers’ brokers, transportation companies, authorities from Mexico and the United States representing customs and border protection, as well as the City of San Luis, a major location in South County. Among the businesses with a strong presence in Yuma County in the area of distribution are Bose, R.L. Jones Customs Brokers, Coca Cola and Johnson Controls.

3 Aerospace and Defense Testing.

Aerospace and Defense Testing is strong within the region, with the Defense Contractor Complex (DCC) at Yuma International Airport, America’s newest defense aviation park. The area supports a wide range of defense contractors, including General Electric and Boeing. Engineering, servicing, research and development are part of the technical areas needing highly qualified and trained individuals.

4 Manufacturing. The Yuma Manufacturing Association, initiated in 2006, has targeted workforce improvement within the region, emphasizing best production, best practices in human resource management, and operations excellence. Shaw Industries, Johnson Controls, Gaming Partners International, and Daewoo maintain a strong local presence.

THE CHALLENGE

Yuma County is increasingly being seen as a bountiful, resource-rich, bicultural locale ideal for meeting requirements of a high-technology headquarters, necessitating a range of high-skill job-seekers. Concurrent large-scale layoffs due to weakened demand in other areas have yielded a large number of newly unemployed middle-management professionals unaccustomed to being unemployed and deemed “over-qualified” for many jobs. In addition, large numbers of low-skilled individuals have been displaced. Meanwhile, new technical positions having rigorous requirements present a target one cannot meet contribute to a frustrating scenario.

Both employers and job-seekers hesitate to commit to investing in job training for uncertain positions in a marketplace that continues to establish. The historical gap

between high-tech needs and low-skill level of the workforce, while showing signs of improvement, continues to influence choices in the labor market.

As shown in Fig. 1, re-skilling incorporates different job-seeking clients who have varying needs. While presenting a complex picture, the situation demands that workforce development work differently and more broadly, to encompass critical and very real needs that affect people, their lives, the community and the economy.

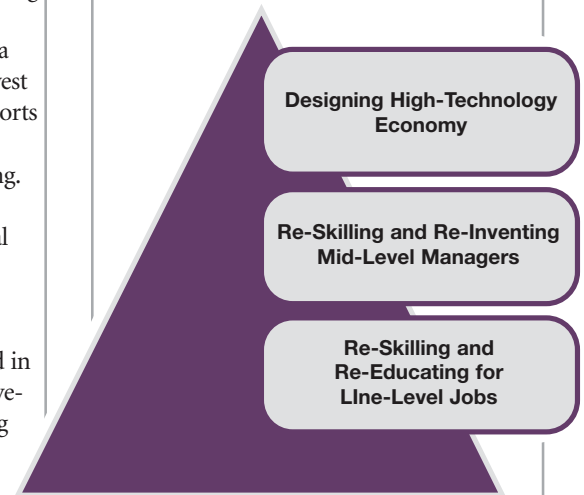


Fig. 1 Re-Skilling for Economic Growth

A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Faced with a major re-skilling challenge YPIC has applied funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), in addition to leveraging support from its Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) grant, providing education to individuals seeking four-year educational degrees in fields such as engineering and information technology.

What is YPIC doing to establish extraordinary re-skilling endeavors? Several action initiatives are in place to respond to the need for re-skilling the workforce:

>> Ensuring data-driven decision-making through outreach - In a broad, community- and business-based environment, YPIC’s strategy for linking employer needs, both current- and future-based, begins with real-time intelligence gathering. Two experienced and respected professionals rep-

representing multiple communities in the greater Yuma region devote full-time energy to the complicated picture of simultaneous job growth and decline. One position addresses the business sector; the parallel is devoted to outreach to the job-seeking population and the community.

Employers are more willing to keep employees employed if the employee is engaged in activities that increase their professional growth.”

>> Identifying transferable skills possessed by job-seekers - For long-term employees who never expected to be job-seekers, the skill of examining one’s own

inventory to expand and enhance their chances of obtaining employment. We also face the problem of several job-seekers being over-qualified due to their years of employment, education and training. We continue to help them craft their résumés to obtain the interview with employers.”

>> Providing value-added services - YPIC has found that re-skilling encompasses re-visiting all aspects of the individual’s life that have been threatened: finance, professional confidence, current skills, and new skills. YPIC approaches re-skilling with a value-added approach. Within the new “Re-Employment Center,” YPIC has brought in partnering organizations to deliver financial advisement, counseling services, advanced résumé-builders who can position talent toward federal and other jobs.

>> Filling educational gaps - YPIC remains attuned to the importance of positioning job-seekers competitively, both in job skills and in education needed for filling open jobs. According to Goetz, “YPIC is hosting several different types of training for individuals who are retooling themselves during this recession. Several job-seeking clients are enrolled in ESL, ABE and GED, due to the fact that competition is fierce. Not having a GED is a significant barrier in today’s job market.”

>> Orienting youth to service learning and job opportunities - The youth programming available to young citizens of Yuma through the ARRA initiative has established a national reputation for innovation. Exposure and eventual employment feature paid and non-paid experience in solar energy, engineering and high-tech agriculture. Janette Crawford, manager of the youth programs, says that youth are “developing a solar garden within a revitalization neighborhood while obtaining high school and community college credit. Solar lighting is installed to allow individuals to work in the garden without daylight; alter-

‘For long-term employees who never expected to be job-seekers, the skill of examining one’s own capabilities is difficult.’

—Patrick Goetz, Educational Opportunity Center

>> Expanding service delivery locations and modalities - Not only has YPIC expanded its services as its main one-stop within the City of Yuma, it has emphasized South County, proximate to areas requiring logistics training, and to East County, using libraries as centers for delivering services. Technology, specifically e-learning, is continually being explored for re-skilling employees in high-technology careers, in addition to the necessary “soft skills” training needed in a fast-paced work environment requiring fluency in interpersonal relations.

>> Enriching capacity through continuous re-skilling of employed individuals - The most common focus of re-skilling is on unemployed job-seekers. Another occurs within the workplace, focusing on the employed. Employers are presently investing in the services of YPIC and its partners to re-skill their employees during the economic downturn. According to Mercedes Mendivil, YPIC’s program administrator, “The continuous process of skilling, re-skilling and multi-skilling our labor force will prepare program participants for available jobs in this market.

capabilities is difficult, explains Patrick Goetz, manager of the Educational Opportunity Center. “Many job-seekers initially view their skills very narrowly. Usually after several unsuccessful job interviews, job-seekers turn to the one-stop centers. We assist these individuals with a thorough skills



Fig. 2 Value-Added Services for Re-Skilling

native methods of composting and seeding are taught and applied.”

Artistic entrepreneurship is also provided for youth. Crawford explains that “youth will be working within the local school district in developing ceramic skills and pieces of art to be marketed for retail. The youth receive entrepreneurship education from Arizona Western College and then attend a one week academic residential program at Northern Arizona University to learn firing and producing art work. Youth then work with the City of Yuma Art Center in showcasing their art.”

- >> Convening key partners to meet shared goals - YPIC functions as convener and facilitator of partners mutually committed to addressing county-wide economic and workforce development opportunities. This role ensures joint investment of education, tools and incentives that maximize the convergence of employer and job-seeker needs. YPIC partners with the Greater Yuma Economic Development Corporation, Arizona Western

Re-skilling programs that connect the job-seeker with the employer generate numerous job placements.

College, Goodwill Industries, Western Arizona Council of Governments (WACOG), Arizona Department of Economic Security and others.

- >> Delivering rapid response teams for large-scale layoffs - YPIC has established a signature capability of delivering first-class “rapid response” to organizations and their employees




where layoffs are planned. As early as possible in the cycle, YPIC’s rapid-response team takes action, providing planning and re-skilling for employees of the firm, offering résumé-building services, linking the employees to organizations needing the core skills possessed by these employees and transitioning individuals according to re-skilling. The goal is to make the change seamless and productive for workers and the economy alike.

- >> Planning and conducting targeted outreach events - YPIC has hosted two recent job fairs, featuring 50 to 75 employers and 2000 to 2500 employees at each event. This endeavor represents the signature, proactive effort on the part of the YPIC team, maintaining currency in community and business needs, and offering a venue for skill-identification and showcasing. YPIC also offers career expo programs and educationally-oriented “Lunch and Learn” programs for employers, both for purposes of informing the communities served of the wide range of areas in which YPIC can assist them.
- >> Responding to immediate re-skilling needs - Among the most popular training programs delivered in Yuma County are the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Commercial

Driving License (CDL). These re-skilling programs generate numerous job placements. Systematic success in connecting the job seeker with the employer is YPIC’s approach. Two additional training initiatives for which job-seekers leave the county include Certified Caregiver and A+ Technical Certification. All of these four areas lead to jobs in a relatively more immediate sense.

CONCLUSION

The YPIC, together with its long-term partners in the economic and workforce development structure, is optimizing collaborative efforts to learn the needs, connect key players, know employers and job-seekers, re-skill the workforce, and continue to facilitate and invent processes that join the need and the capabilities to re-skill Yuma County. The community is clearly poised for a strong future, and, ultimately, the proof of efforts will be in the future that is created by the committed business and community partners and the continually renewable workforce. 

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