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Machining competent employees

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GRAND RAPIDS – **Alliance CNC** knew it wanted to be involved with **WorkKeys** ever since the company was invited to a kick-off for the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) program in West Michigan.

The push to use WorkKeys and the NCRC is a part of the **Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED)** initiative to assess and quantify the West Michigan workforce.

Alliance specializes in the manufacture and regrinding of precision tools and works out of a state-of-the-art facility featuring eight Walter CNC power tool grinders along with a full complement of manual grinding equipment. Established in 1995, the Grand Rapids-based company recognized WorkKeys/NCRC's potential as an additive to its hiring and workforce development processes.

In Alliance's estimation, area high school participation would be crucial to the long-term success and support of the program. It sought meetings with the assistant superintendent of Kent Intermediate School District and the local school board and gained commitment.

According to Alliance Operations Manager Jamie Zywicki, working with the schools remains vital because its "best employees are grabbed fresh out of high school or a year or two out of junior college."

In Zywicki's opinion, the term WorkKeys should be common knowledge.

But he feels overall public awareness about the program – which he deems a tremendous marketing tool for attracting new business and weeding through prospective applicants – needs heightened visibility. Zywicki believes schools should work to promote WorkKeys services.

WorkKeys is a test employees take to determine at what level – gold, silver or bronze – they place. Corresponding to their scores, workers are given a gold, silver or bronze NCRC.

Two years ago, a profile of Alliance's key positions determined bronze NCRC performance to be the standard for new hires. Through quantification of required skills and objective assessment of potential candidates, Alliance looked to enhance recruitment decisions by better selecting individuals capable of delivering desired performance. The company tested all incumbent hourly employees to inventory current skill set. Testing also provided data for preparing development plans for the current staff.

Through clear communication, employees received a commitment that test results would not result in dismissal. Instead, results would be used for understanding strengths and weaknesses. Any identified skill gaps would be remedied with education opportunities.

Test results rendered positive feedback, according to the company. All incumbent employees achieved at least a bronze NCRC. Test completion and result reviews led to employee discussion, and several

team members have committed to additional training.

Alliance's hiring process has proved more effective and efficient using the NCRC standards. Employees entering the company at a bronze level now arrive armed with necessary skill requirements.

"Five different employees we didn't hire because of (their) inability to pass," Zywicki said, "Another person tested higher."

Training time has been reduced by 10-15 percent – a conservative figure in Zywicki's estimation.

"Anybody that we've hired since that time, we haven't had to send out for additional training," he said.

Without the need of additional training, Zywicki believes employees can focus on what he calls the complexities of the business.

Alliance noted immediate improvement in performance levels on the job with 50 percent fewer errors. Performance levels of employees hired since the implementation of WorkKeys/NCRC has revealed consistency with test scores, demonstrating NCRC's effectiveness as a predictor of worker capabilities in the assessed skill areas.

As Alliance moves forward with plans for the human resource program, it sees value in additional tools to measure and quantify soft skills. According to Zywicki, Alliance has since considered setting the bar even higher than a bronze NCRC level.

"Our intention is to continue to use the program," he said. **MiBiz**