

West Michigan

National Career Readiness Certificate Initiative

Employer Outreach and Sales Process

April 28, 2008

Created by:

Grand Rapids Community College
West Michigan WIRED
Rachael Jungblut

Documented by:

The Council for Adult and
Experiential Learning (CAEL)
Joel Simon



www.michigancrc.org

Contents:

- Introduction (3)
- Employer Engagement: Enlightened Self Interest (4)
- The Product – what are we selling? (4)
- The Sale – what is the transaction? (6)
- The Customer and his/her Challenge
 - Who within the company? (7)
 - Characteristics of high and low-probability prospects (8)
- Sales Approach, Strategies
 - Awareness (10)
 - Relevance (11)
 - Relatability (13)
 - Action (14)
- Taking Action (14)
- Answers to Common Concerns (15)
- Moving from Concept to Application (16)
 - Experiencing the process (17)
 - Implementing NCRC Projects for Incumbent Workers (17)
 - Communicating Costs (19)
 - Accessing partners (19)
 - Beyond the NCRC (21)
- Conclusion (21)
- Authors' Note and Contact Information (22)

Introduction

The West Michigan WIRED initiative and the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) Innovation Team have been working to deploy the NCRC throughout the region since 2006. We began this journey with a deep commitment to serving the needs of both West Michigan's employers and job candidates, and with faith in the power of institutions and public systems that would need to be leveraged to succeed. We were far less certain as to exactly how all of those parts would work together to create real, lasting transformation of our workforce, our institutions, our systems and most importantly how we would work together.

Since that time Michigan has emerged as a leading producer of individuals with verifiable foundational workplace skills, and our partners have become nationally recognized as NCRC advocates and practitioners. While we still have much work to do, our efforts to date have proven that success is attainable. To build upon this solid record, the West Michigan WIRED NCRC Innovation Team has reflected on what has made this such a promising effort and how we can share our methodologies, strategies and processes that have resulted in the employer adoption that is crucial to this initiative and similar initiatives throughout the State of Michigan.

The document you are now reading represents the first effort to formally support emerging practitioners as they work towards promotion and adoption of the National Career Readiness Certificate. Designed as a resource to quickly bring on new members of our sales team, the document articulates what we have found to be winning strategies to describe and sell the NCRC to employers, and to connect them to the ultimate economic success of West Michigan, beginning with NCRC engagement.

Each part of the strategy described here can and must be customized to the realities of the region, the employer and to person promoting the NCRC. More than a step-by-step recipe, this guide will offer both new and seasoned practitioners with a foundation for continued success of the NCRC.

Employer Engagement

Self-interest and Community Benefit: the intersection of fiscal responsibility and corporate social responsibility.

Seeking involvement and investment in the National Career Readiness Certificate initiative has both elements of a public program promotion and a traditional sales process. Inevitably, encouraging an employer or collection of employers to make a decision to invest resources, be they time, money, attention, policy adjustment, etc. will require direct articulation of the value proposition for the individual within a company and related concerns (such as ease of use, documented success, regional cultural adoption). At the same time, much of the concept of the NCRC and its use in West Michigan is built upon macro conditions that have lead to the particular challenges facing the employer community. Thus the promotion of the NCRC involves both the advancement of this particular tool, as well as an acknowledgement of broader labor/economic conditions and recognition of the public system's role in addressing them though tools including (but not limited to) the NCRC.

The employer decision therefore to use the NCRC will be primarily self-serving, but will also consider the public role in creating conditions and tools that enable business success. The NCRC sales staff will promote adoption of the NCRC as a way for employers to address an aspect of their immediate pain but also to institutionalize a solution in the broader labor marketplace, which will ultimately result in a better pool of workers for the employer and all employers in the region. Accessing the NCRC is a way to simultaneously address a single employer's talent issues as well as the conditions that give rise to that challenge in the first place.

The promotion and sale of the NCRC, therefore, is approached in a way that includes but does not stop at promoting the quality and usability of a particular testing product or skills remediation product. It is the challenge of the NCRC sales person to establish the link between the private and public concerns and the public resources invested in the NCRC solution. It is also the privilege of the NCRC sales person to offer a tool and a process that supports both employers' fiscal responsibility and sense of corporate social responsibility. By using the NCRC the employer saves himself time, money and lost productivity, and simultaneously increases the value of public workforce delivery systems and opportunities for area residents to advance.

The Product – what are we selling?

What is the NCRC?

The National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) is a valid, portable credential that verifies individuals' foundational workplace skills as applied in hundreds of positions and occupational areas. The NCRC is based on three ACT WorkKeys assessments measures

the three skill areas: Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information and Locating Information, are the foundational skills found in over 85% of jobs and occupations that have been analyzed over the last 15 years.

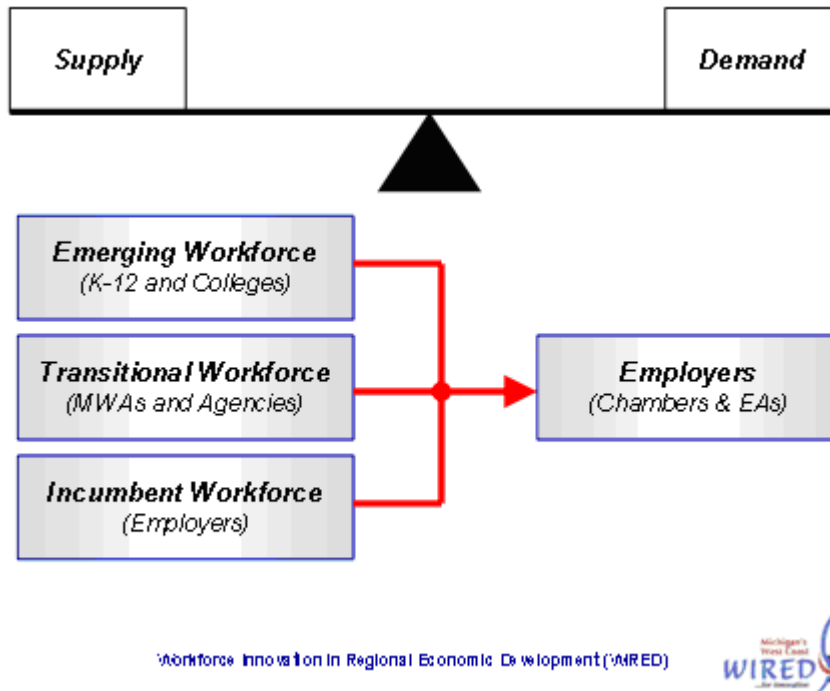
The NCRC is important to West Michigan because it establishes standards for foundational skill levels. These standards allow employers to hire with more confidence that the applicants have the underlying abilities associated with success in the job. In addition, the NCRC helps individuals understand their skills in relation to job opportunities. Both employers and individuals can use the NCRC to invest (time and money) in learning and training that is directly associated with employability and workplace success.

The NCRC is a very good predictor of job performance based on the composite of the scores on the three assessments which power the NCRC. The NCRC composite assessment results are a stronger predictor of job performance than other selection tools such as personality tests, reference checks, and years of education. The implications to an organization are significant.

Job performance is a good indicator of employee productivity. Employees with higher job performance ratings are typically more productive and in turn make a greater contribution to their employers economic output. Given that the NCRC predicts performance its use empowers employers to hire individuals with a high likely hood of success. Research also suggests that employee retention is increased when employees are placed in jobs matched to their skill sets. The NCRC can therefore contribute to an employers employee retention efforts and their identification of individuals likely to be productive.

-Don Carstensen, ACT

The NCRC is a currency. It represents a measure of value as a validator of foundational workplace skills. Employers utilize a variety of sources for workers. By consistently applying the NCRC, the variation in quality from among those sources can be lessened. Whether earned through a MichiganWorks! center, a public secondary educational institution, or through an employer, the NCRC consistently verifies and communicates workers' foundational abilities.



It is critical not to confuse the term NCRC with the term WorkKeys. While the two are deeply interwoven, they are distinct elements and must not be discussed interchangeably.

- The NCRC is a Credential. The West Michigan WIRED Initiative is working to make the NCRC the most widely recognized, accepted and valued foundational skills credential in the region. The NCRC is the currency by which employers, schools, workforce agencies and individuals will understand the relative value of foundational workplace skills.
- WorkKeys is the assessment system upon which the NCRC is based. The WorkKeys system includes 9 WorkKeys and supporting job analysis tools. More sophisticated users of the NCRC may become interested in understanding and using its job analysis components and other WorkKeys assessments. Some customers may bypass typical NCRC engagement and move directly into use of WorkKeys assessments both within and outside of the NCRC. Sales staff must be prepared to explain and offer other elements of the WorkKeys system should they be more appropriate to address the employers' challenges than the NCRC.

The Sale – what is the transaction?

The cost of conducting NCRC assessments is currently supported by a federal grant (WIRED) and is delivered via educational institutions and workforce development agencies throughout the region (see attached list of locations and schedules). The “close” in this case is therefore not a financial transaction. Rather, there are several types of agreements that constitute a successful “sale” or “close”.

The vehicle by which an employer is engaged is the **Letter of Commitment** (see attached) which indicates how the employer will be engaged with the NCRC. A sale is initiated when an employer signs this letter and exhibits whatever level of commitment is desired. It is not uncommon for employers to make only minimal commitment to the concept of the NCRC and make no commitment to actually *doing* anything differently as a result of the commitment. While in this case the “sale” has minimally happened, further work with the employer will be required in order to initiate some activity and to increase the value of that commitment. It is important to respect employers’ current position and capacity (or resistance) to undertake significant behavioral changes. For employers willing to endorse the NCRC but who are not yet willing to change behavior, the NCRC sales staff must continue to provide opportunities for and promote even modest usage of the NCRC. Sales staff should articulate and emphasize the depth of support that is available to the employer from the NCRC system to ease the disruption that may be caused by initiating use of the CNRC.

Beyond signing a commitment letter a deeper, more meaningful transaction is the initiation of a project that utilizes the NCRC and undertakes an **NCRC Project**. The level to which an employer engages will vary substantially depending on the population presenting the most significant challenges (new or incumbent workers, recruitment or skill advancement), the business conditions (integration of new machinery or processes), and the level sophistication of their human resources and training/development programs. Sales staff must listen carefully to the conditions and challenges in order to apply the most relevant usage of the NCRC and associated tools.

An NCRC Project is any initiative, program, or effort of an employer to utilize the NCRC and its supporting tools and mechanisms. NCRC projects may include any or all of the following steps:

- Formally requesting or requiring that candidates possess an NCRC upon application, resulting in increased assessment activity within the region
- Having incumbent staff (at whatever level) attempt to earn an NCRC
- Having incumbent staff take any of the WorkKeys Assessments
- Incorporating NCRC or WorkKeys data into internal talent management processes, performance reviews, position descriptions
- Working with NCRC staff and/or channel partners to utilize KeyTrain Skills Remediation programs, either on-site or at a channel partner’s location

The Customer and his/her Challenge

To whom are you selling the NCRC?

While schools and workforce service providers utilize the NCRC and the WorkKeys assessments and individuals will benefit by earning an NCRC, the goal of this document is to prepare you to engage employers in recognizing, valuing and using the NCRC as a tool in recruitment, screening and human capital development.

In many instances the NCRC Project Manager will work to create communication with target firms. The Project Manager will often interface with employer personnel at the higher level, including Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer or Operations Manager. Individuals at this level will need to understand the opportunity presented by the NCRC and WIRED, they will most often communicate the opportunity to others within the organization and allow those who would actively use tools like the NCRC to make any decisions about whether or to what degree the company will incorporate the NCRC.

It is the responsibility of the NCRC sales staff to exploit the openings created by the Project Manager and gain an audience with those who have influence or decision-making ability over issues related to human resources and training and development.

While higher-level leadership must support the idea of the NCRC, typically a Human resources manager or director will be responsible for most of the planning and implementation. This HR staff may therefore become either the chief enabler or hindrance to NCRC usage. Sales Staff must articulate the value proposition not only for the company but for the HR staff. Some value statements for the HR staff may include:

- Easier screening of initial applications
- Ability to clearly articulate skill requirements to recruitment sources (schools, staffing firms, MichiganWorks! agencies)
- Assistance with developing job descriptions
- Better informed decisions about company training investments
- Clarification of criteria for employee advancement
- Provides a basis for a system of employee development
- Helps to overcome organizational inertia or employee resistance to change

Characteristics of a viable prospect

Not all employers will appreciate or are likely to use the NCRC as a tool in their hiring or training function. It will be important to recognize the characteristics of employer prospects that indicate greater or lesser likelihood of signing a Letter of Commitment. Many NCRC users face similar challenges, among which are:

- Constantly processing large numbers of applicants
- Using a large variety of recruitment mechanisms such as staffing firms, public workforce agencies, aggressive advertising
- Experience high levels of turnover despite competitive wages
- Lack of internal promotion
- High training and development costs
- Perception of low skill levels among a large number of employees

The presence of any of these characteristics does not in itself indicate that using the NCRC would be of high value to the employer, but may indicate underlying conditions that could be addressed by an NCRC project.

Characteristics of a low-viability prospect

Just as some conditions indicate a need for NCRC, many companies will display traits that indicate that the NCRC may not be a useful tool or may not add enough value to overcome other obstacles. Some of those characteristics may include:

- Wages well below industry standards
- Stated ease of attracting and retaining qualified talent
- Satisfaction with HS Diploma or GED as an accurate indicator of ability and workplace success
- Reliance on vendor-specific or product-specific skill standards
- Small (<10) staff and minimal hiring activity
- Substantial proportion of staff with advanced degrees
- Requires only semi-literate workforce
- HR and Personnel challenges do not include foundational skill levels, or foundational skill levels are of lower among the challenges
- Substantial turnover is not viewed as negative
- Local operations staff are not empowered to make decisions about use of the NCRC

Sales Approach: The Employer Conversation

Once the sales staff secures a conversation with the appropriate employer representative(s), a careful and methodical approach to describing and promoting the value of the NCRC can be employed. The most effective process of promoting the NCRC to employers includes each of the four following elements:

Awareness – acknowledging the broader labor market conditions, regional talent pools, and foundational skill issues that impact business success.

Relevance – presenting the NCRC as a common skills currency, and how the NCRC addresses the underlying issues articulated in the “awareness” stage.

Relatability – Recognizing how the particular employer experiences the region’s larger skills challenges, and how they might apply the NCRC to solve their recruitment, selection, and

Action – Once the challenge and the tool are accepted, how will an employer operationalize involvement? What are the next steps they can take?

It is important to note that this process may not be linear, and it may be necessary for the sales person to move swiftly from one area to another and back again as the situation

determines. Especially when employer staff participating in discussions are not completely consistent, the sales person may need to re-establish awareness of the larger conditions or restate the facts about the NCRC to staff who join the discussion later in the process.

Creating Awareness

Employers in Michigan are experiencing a variety of challenges around recruitment, the strength of worker pipelines, and definition of basic skills. The public awareness around the NCRC initiative acknowledges the larger issues in the region, the state and in the nation. The audience of employers and employer intermediaries (ie chambers, business associations, etc) are a part of this larger condition, and see themselves as such. By appreciating the larger forces in the marketplace and their impact upon particular employer conditions, employers see themselves as actors in a broader solution as opposed to simply users of a particular product. Unless there is an appreciation of this broader condition and the employers' place in it, then decision to adopt and use the NCRC will be a product purchase decision and not one that considers the broader implications of the regional skills challenge. By appealing to both the employers' self interest and where that self interest intersects with public concerns, the decision to adopt the NCRC becomes more than just a price-driven decision.

What are the larger forces?

- The paradox of both high unemployment rates and high vacancies in critical jobs
- Individuals with a high school diploma or GED cannot effectively perform basic computation, reading tasks, or locate information
- Schools and employers mean different things by “more math” or in defining “qualified”
- Applicants and incumbent workers who know and can do one thing well, but do not easily adapt to new technologies, new equipment or the challenges of continuing innovation
- Employers: “Just give me someone who is ready to learn, and I can teach them what they need to know”.

The conversations to raise awareness of a skills challenge and a system response have already begun. Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Organizations, and similar intermediaries regularly address this topic and offer a venue for further discussion. The WIRED initiative was born as a result of this condition. Innovation leaders and the WIRED NCRC Project Manager have seeded this conversation throughout the region.

The NCRC sales staff's role is to continue to remind HR directors and others involved in hiring and talent development that they are operating within this larger laborshed . In many instances it is a higher-level representative who has begun this conversation with the WIRED or NCRC leadership and the more tactical operative within the company will need to be reminded of the conditions that exist within the community.

What to have On-Hand to establish awareness?

Critical facts

- Of high-school graduates in the region, XX% are in need of some remedial instruction when they get to post-secondary education
- Shift in the % of jobs needing low-skills, some college or technical skills, and post-secondary degrees



Compelling stories

- Description of a prominent employer who can't fill key positions amid high unemployment
- An anecdote about a decrease in production levels or efficiency upon an employer changing technologies or applications
- Story of company-sponsored training that doesn't "take" or that must be repeated
- What are the particular challenges facing THIS industry?

The goal of this stage of the sales cycle is to meet the employer at a common understanding of the challenge of basic skills facing the entire region. Once that understanding is established, the conversation can move towards discussion of one possible solution – the NCRC.

Sales staff: I see we're on the same page when it comes to what skill and talent issues may be a challenge to you and to the region moving forward. We've identified a very exciting solution that we'd like you to support– the National Career Readiness Certificate. Whether you choose to simply endorse the certificate or take steps to use it and experience the value yourself, I hope that you can in some way commit to helping us address this challenge.

Relevance

As the employer representative(s) acknowledge and accept the broader conditions within which their company operates, the sales staff can present the NCRC as one part of the remedy to their challenges and relevant to the conditions described in the first stage. It is at this point that the salesperson can introduce the concept of the NCRC.

Sample script: The NCRC is a credential by which we can all understand what basic skills are needed to be able to perform in any number of job roles. To earn the NCRC, individuals need to show proficiency in skill areas that are to some extent important to most jobs. This is based on detailed examination of more than

14,000 jobs across the US. Based on the skill requirements of those 14,000 jobs, the NCRC shows whether the individual has the reading, applied math and locating information skill to be able to successfully perform the functions required. While in most cases, some occupational specific instruction may be necessary, an NCRC proves that the person has the foundational skills to do it. No matter where you get your recruits, if they have an NCRC you will always know what they are able to do.

The challenge is to establish the NCRC as a more valid, reliable remedy to the variability of other assessments, diplomas, and certificates that they see but cannot necessarily trust as indicators of employee success. As the employer representative comprehends the concept of the NCRC, some more detail can be offered about generally how it works, including:

- Determining the NCRC levels required by particular jobs
- Where testing takes place
- Who pays for the assessments
- What happens if someone who seems like a good candidate doesn't score well enough

It will be tempting to discuss in detail the WorkKeys system and how it works, as well as how the employer can leverage area schools, workforce agencies and colleges to use it. While some detail can be provided, it is important not to move too quickly into how the delivery system operates or to blur the distinction between the NCRC and WorkKeys. Common Objection at this point:

Objection: I really don't need a measure for foundational skills, I just need people who can show up for work every day, and do a good job.

Answer: I understand your perspective. I agree that personal, interpersonal, communication and problem solving are also important. Certainly someone who pursues and earns an NCRC demonstrates some level of commitment and responsibility. Let me show you which other foundational exams can be great measures for some of those things.

ACT: Foundational and Personal Skills Assessments measure Different Applied Job Skills:

Communication	Problem Solving	Interpersonal	Personal
Business Writing	Applied Technology	Teamwork	Performance
Listening	Applied Mathematics		Talent
Reading for Information	Locating Information		Fit
Writing	Observation		



18

Relatability

Once the common understanding of the challenge is established and the employer understands the basics of the NCRC, the salesperson must then work to connect this discussion with the realities of the individual employer. The sales person must do some research prior to the meeting to have some understanding of how the larger conditions discussed above are impacting the employer, and what “pain” are they experiencing as a result. For example, are they:

- Suffering from high levels of turnover?
- Hiring high school graduates who cannot perform basic calculations or effectively read and internalize instructions?
- Spending a great deal on pre-employment assessments that don’t accurately predict workplace success?
- Investing a lot in training for which they are unable to see results?
- Experiencing high rework or scrap rates due to basic computation, conversion or other errors rooted in basic skills?
- Needing to repeat trainings that don’t “stick” the first time?
- Advancing employees because of time on the job rather than effectiveness or ability?
- Not advancing employees because of low-quality options to backfill the positions they vacate?

- Need to integrate large numbers of employees through acquisition of a business or business unit?

These are just some examples of localized conditions that validate the broader realities that the NCRC is poised to address. Again, depending upon who participates in this discussion it may be necessary to shift quickly between Relatability and Relevance to ensure that the discussion proceeds without leaving anyone behind.

As the sales staff develops an understanding of the employer challenges, s/he can then begin to speak more concretely about the skill categories validated by the NCRC – Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information and Locating Information. At this point the conversation becomes more concrete for the employer and exposure to actual test items provides the practical example of how the employers’ foundational skill needs are measured by the NCRC. At this point a brief description of how the numerical profiles are derived may be useful.

Resources to have on hand here:

- *O*NET/ACT Occupational Reference Data*
- *Core Assessments for Certification brochure*
- *Sample Test questions*

Taking Action

By establishing that there is indeed a skills challenge in the region, presenting the NCRC and exploring how that challenge is manifesting itself within the individual company, the sales person is setting the employer up to take action. The level of action any particular employer is prepared to take will vary depending upon the depth of the challenge the face, the level of investment in alternate tools, how progressive the leadership is, and the level of the employer’s community engagement (ie use of and comfort with local colleges, workforce programs, etc).

The menu of commitments a company can make and actions they can take are spelled out on the NCRC Letter of Commitment (LOC).

While higher levels of engagement are preferable to lower, the submission of a Letter of Commitment formally engages the employer and validates the value and work of the NCRC itself and the community investment in the NCRC broadly. Submission of an LOC may not necessarily engage the employer in actually using the NCRC system. It is the challenge of the sales staff to gather as many endorsements (LOC’s) as possible, and to subsequently convert LOC’s to action and utilization of the tool at whatever level is most appropriate for the employer in question.

Common Questions and some Sample Answers

As employers confront the decision to engage in the NCRC initiative, there are a number of questions that are shared by a large number of employers. Some of those questions are below, along with some ways to address them.

Common question: I'm satisfied with the applicants that come to me and with the skills of my employees. Why do I need to use the NCRC?

Response: If you do not see the need to learn more about your applicants' and employees' skills, then the NCRC is not for you. Thank you for your time!

Common question: I already have a tool that I use to assess the skills of applicants to my company. How is this one different/better?

Response: Without knowing the details of your tool, I would ask the following questions:

- ***Do individuals apply having already taken the assessment?*** *The West Michigan NCRC system aims to have job applicants assessed via education and workforce development agencies. If you indicate that an NCRC is desired for applicants, they will access the system for the assessment and you will be able to skip that step in your hiring process.*
- ***Do you pay to administer the assessment?*** *The West Michigan WIRED grant supports administration of the NCRC assessments and skill remediation. Using the NCRC will remove that cost from your screening process*
- ***Are the assessments you're using predictive of success on the job?*** *If not, then a small-scale project to try out the NCRC may prove beneficial.*

Common question: This seems like a good idea, but it will be too complicated for me to change my practices.

Response: There are many ways to use the NCRC – some are more complicated and many are rather simple. We will find a level that is right for you – perhaps simply by identifying the NCRC levels appropriate to your openings and helping your recruitment and HR staff become aware of the NCRC and what it means. If you do three simple steps, of aligning your employee handbook, place the NCRC level on your job orders, and ask for the credential of every new person you bring into your facility, you have adopted and committed to the NCRC in your organization.

Common question: I need more applicants, not fewer. Doesn't the NCRC limit the number of people who I can consider for my openings?

Response: But how much time and money do you lose reviewing and assessing candidates who are ultimately not successful in the application process or on the job? The NCRC helps to sort large numbers of individuals before they make an application, and through the skill development modules available, helps applicants become better able to meet your needs before you ever screen them. Your adoption of the credential as a currency for hire sets a clear standard for our workforce development agencies, schools and the community that prepares workers for your needs.

Common question: Will my employees see this as a threat? What if they do poorly on the assessment?

Response: The employees will not feel threatened if the NCRC is used as a staff development and talent development tool, and not punitively or as a way to determine who will lose a job should a layoff event occur. The assessment is only one part of the NCRC system. It also includes instructional resources aimed at helping individuals raise scores and earn higher-level certificates.

Moving from Concept to Application

New Hire usage options – fulfilling the basic commitment of the LOC

Using the NCRC to screen applicants is the lowest barrier and perhaps most readily comprehended option. Within the applicant screening category employers can weight the NCRC differently

From easiest to more difficult as a simple assessment tool...

- Request that applicants possess an NCRC
- Require that applicants possess NCRC in order to be considered
- Define NCRC levels (Bronze/Silver/Gold) for each occupation
- Formalize levels within company job descriptions and associated marketing and job postings

<i>NCRC Use....</i>	<i>Addresses....</i>
Request that applicants possess an NCRC at any level, or a particular NCRC level	Communicates Basic qualifications and foundational skill levels
Require applicants to possess an NCRC at any level	Reduces the number of candidates who are not viable
Define and require particular NCRC levels (Bronze/Silver/Gold)	Further subdivides the applicant pool and increases likelihood of skills fit for those who apply
Formalize NCRC levels within company materials	Specifies job descriptions and EEOC compliance
Marketing and Advertising contains the NCRC request / requirement	Public communication of the value of NCRC and emphasis on validation of foundational skills

Incumbent Worker usage options – beginning the journey of NCRC in the organization

This process of using the NCRC as a means to inspire talent development among the employer’s existing staff can be somewhat more involved, requires a number of decisions to

be made, and ultimately will require processes to be changed. Firms who decide to utilize the NCRC and associated tools will do so according to particular needs and current workforce conditions, and will learn the nuances of an NCRC project gradually as it applies to their particular situation. It is important to remember (and remind the client) that becoming such an NCRC user is more of a journey than an event.

When bringing the National Career Readiness Certificate to incumbent staff, there are a number of important decisions. How those decisions are determined, documented and carried out is critical to the success of the credential being a useful tool. It is not uncommon for these decisions to overwhelm the employer, resulting in the employer getting stuck amid the variety of issues. NCRC sales and implementation staff can work to calm the employer, and help them to address the pertinent issues.

The following model is useful for creating an experience that allows the employer to engage key staff, around answering the questions of “what are we going to use the data for?” and “what are we going to change in our process?”.

Experiencing the Process

The process of sitting for a series of exams can be anxiety provoking. Prior to implementing an NCRC program within a company, it is helpful to create an NCRC experience for a small sample of company workers and leadership. The Experiential Model offers individuals within the company the experience of taking part in the assessments. At least one individual from top leadership, four managers and 15 line staff should participate in the assessment. This provides first-hand knowledge of not only the process and the test, but of the accompanying emotional response to the experience (which in many cases will be negative). The experience allows staff and leadership first hand knowledge to begin decision making.

Ultimately, the information generated by NCRC process will need to be used to support employee skill development goals. How aggressively the data is gathered will offer more options for how it is used. Some companies may employ a more passive, suggestive approach which will result in a looser reliance on the data, while others will employ a more rigorous approach which will offer a richer data set from which to make talent development decisions. The first, easiest use distinction is that between using the NCRC for recruitment and screening purposes, and using the NCRC for incumbent worker skill development purposes.

If the employer has more than 20 employees, it is unlikely that they will take a holistic approach and apply these principles to all positions. Employers are encouraged to start with one or two job classifications, and then build from there, thus beginning their “journey”.

Levels of Application for the Incumbent Workforce

As employers gain comfort and familiarity with the NCRC process and experience the value, they may begin to explore more robust usage of the tools available. Application of the

NCRC to an incumbent workforce can be varied, requiring different levels of employee commitment and integrated into HR and training functions in a number of ways with differing levels of impact on the employee and the workplace.

From easiest to more difficult

- Request that each employee earn an NCRC
- Require that each employee earn an NCRC
- Work to improve NCRC levels (via employee development plan, performance bonus, promotions)
- Base HR and advancement decisions to some degree on NCRC attainment and movement
- Use NCRC framework for career ladder, training and development, employee development program
 - Use more deliberate, more rigorous job analysis tools (ie estimation or profiling over Occupational Database info)
 - Ascertain relative importance of basic skills and therefore relative importance of the NCRC in staffing/HR decisions
 - Utilize assessments in areas beyond those contained within the NCRC
 - Link to additional (non-WorkKeys) tools for decision making.

<i>Use...</i>	<i>Addresses...</i>
Request that employees earn NCRC	Communicates the company’s recognition of the value of credentialed skills, regardless of employees’ formal academic achievement
Require that employees earn NCRC At any level	Further emphasizes the value of foundational skill verification, promotes life-long learning
Offer the Opportunity for Individuals to raise their certificate level by using KeyTrain software and instruction	Establishes a culture of skill development, moving the emphasis from evaluation to advancement
Require that employees earn NCRC matched to their occupation	Establishes that the required skill development is important to optimal job performance
Require employees to improve their certificate level within a certain amount of time.	Links learning and development to employee development plan, and review structure
Use NCRC data in advancement, promotion, review	Establishes objective, skill-based reward and job assignment criteria
Use NCRC framework for career ladder and employee development	Offers employees guidance and resources for career development

The changes to HR and learning policies that necessarily come along with implementing a project will likely be cause for some anxiety among staff. Preparing to launch an NCRC initiative (at whatever level, with whatever focus) requires, at a minimum, the following:

- Understand your culture – will this be considered “thing of the month?”

- The entire management team, from CEO to front line supervisors all need to be on the same page
- Document your expectations of both your leadership staff and your employees
- Document processes
- Document outcomes
- Define your level of confidentiality about score data, and certificate data
- Define your commitment to learning and development

Communicating Costs

While many of the costs of undertaking an NCRC Project are born by the public workforce and education system, NCRC sales staff should not downplay or obscure the employer investment that will be necessary in order to achieve a useful outcome. For individuals who take NCRC-related assessments but are not doing so via a public workforce or education program must pay for those assessments either directly or through employer contributions. Incumbent workers who take all three NCRC assessments must invest at least four hours of their time (or employers' time) in just the assessment process. HR staff coordination time may also be substantial. Skills training and retest time must also be considered if they do not initially achieve the desired scores. Employers who select WorkKeys assessments that are not included within the NCRC (Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information, Locating Information) will be unable to access grant funds and must bear those costs themselves. While the value remains substantially greater than any of these costs, NCRC Sales Staff must be honest about, at a minimum, the level of time needed as well as additional fees they might incur.

Engaging Channel Partners

When the customer commits to using any piece of the NCRC in order to accomplish the activities listed among the project options on page 4 (WorkKeys assessments, KeyTrain, job profiling and/or related tools), it will be necessary to activate the NCRC and WorkKeys Delivery Channel. Channel partners may include any or all of the following:

- High Schools (K-12 System)
- Colleges and Universities
- Michigan Works Agencies (MWAs)
- Private Employment Agencies
- Chambers of Commerce
- Economic Development Agencies
- Employers Associations
- Literacy and Adult Education Organizations
- State Agencies and Partners
- National Agencies and Partners

The NCRC Sales staff must maintain current information on all channel partners within the region and understand the capacity to deliver the portions of the NCRC system needed by the customer. Channel partners include participating Community Colleges, MichiganWorks! centers, ACT-certified job profilers, ACT-certified assessment proctors, and KeyTrain locations. The following are the providers currently delivering NCRC-related services in West Michigan:

Grant Rapids Community College

143 Bostwick Ave NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
616-234-3471

Ionia Education Center

250 E. Tuttle Road
Ionia, MI 48846
Phone: 616/527-3319

Michigan Career and Technical Institute

11611 W. Pine Lake Road
Plainwell, MI 49080
Phone: 269-664-9205

Michigan Works! Newaygo County

4747 W. 48th Street, Suite 162
Fremont, MI 49412
800-981-2551

Montcalm Community College

2800 College Drive
Sidney, MI 48885
Phone: 989/328-2111

Muskegon Community College

221 S. Quarterline Road
Muskegon, MI 49442
Phone: 231/777-0217

Ottawa Area Intermediate School District

13565 Port Sheldon Road
Holland, MI 49424
Phone: 877-702-8600 x 4089

Thompson M-TEC

6364 136th Ave Pvt
Holland, MI 49424
877-298-0007 x 4208

Beyond the NCRC

General usage...

While the focus of the sales effort is the skills currency of the NCRC, this set of tools may also be used as a jumping-off point for more targeted human capital initiatives. NCRC offers a broad indication of foundational skills as they relate to the occupations profiled in the ACT database. This is a useful measure of competence and inexpensive to implement, but many employers will desire a more detailed, more dimensional picture of their current or potential workforce.

More specificity...

To gain more specificity about the position requirements, employers can move beyond valuing just the NCRC and specifying - according to the occupational database, job profiling, and the available estimation tools - which of the NCRC levels will be a more accurate readiness indicator. In stead of simply asking for an NCRC, the employer specifies whether a Bronze, Silver or Gold level NCRC is best for the position in question.

Still more specificity...

While Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information and Locating Information comprise the core elements of so many positions, employers may benefit from measurement of other foundational skill areas as well. The WorkKeys system offers other categories of assessment in addition to those included in the NCRC, and employers who gain comfort with the concept and appreciate the broader system elements may utilize these other assessments for an even more detailed picture of their positions and their workforce. (see WorkKeys assessment options on page 10)

Highly Specialized...

Ultimately even deeper skills analysis will enable more effective matching of employees to positions, and more deliberately guide employee development. Employers may build upon the NCRC and WorkKeys tools with training and assessment related to specific technologies and workplace duties, confident in the knowledge that participants' foundation skills are sufficient to benefit from these more advanced investment in worker skills.

Conclusion

While every person and sales prospect will offer its own unique challenge and set of circumstances, this guide will help to provide NCRC sales staff with a consistent, reasoned approach to making the NCRC West Michigan's skill validation method of choice. This guide will serve as a starting-point for a common understanding of the NCRC tool, the value to the employer in particular and the community more broadly, and the steps towards adoption and usage. As the region continues to increase the quality of our workforce thought the NCRC additional tools, resources and strategies for employer adoption will emerge and be incorporated into future versions of this guide.

Just as this guide is a work-in-progress, so too is our effort to increase the success of West Michigan employers, job seekers and education/workforce development practitioners. The NCRC is but one step in this journey. If we use this opportunity to truly understand the needs of employers and align our programs and resources accordingly, the success will not just be for the NCRC initiative but for the credibility of our delivery system and the success of our region. Thank you for embarking on this journey, and for your commitment to the success of West Michigan and its workforce.

Authors' Note

The authors welcome input, suggestions, questions and comments about the contents of this document, as well as information from around the country about similar efforts to support practitioners' efforts to promote, sell, deliver and derive value from the National Career Readiness Certificate and associated products/services.

Contact information for the Authors:

Rachael Jungblut, Executive Director
Michigan CRC Advocates
Grand Rapids Community College
(616) 234-3623
rjungblu@grcc.edu

Joel Simon, Senior Consultant
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
(312) 499-2678
jsimon@cael.org