Lessons Learned

Pennsylvania Plastics Initiative

High Growth Job Training Initiative
Office of Workforce Development
Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry

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Facilitated Meeting

May 29, 2008

Report for:

Plastics SourceNet

Pennsylvania College of Technology

Facilitation and Report by:

Dennis E. Gilbert

APPRECIATIVE
STRATEGIES

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AGENDA

PA Plastics Initiative Grant - Lessons Learned Meeting

May 29, 2008
10 a.m. – 3 p.m.
Morgan Valley Retreat Center

9:30 – 10 a.m.	Coffee, Informal Greetings, and Introductions
10-10:05 a.m.	Welcome and Introduction of Session – Hank White
10:05– 10:20 a.m.	Agenda Review, Meeting Approach, Desired Outcomes – Dennis Gilbert
10:20 – 10:40 a.m.	Background/Overview – Frank Sorg
10:40 – 11 a.m.	Lessons Learned Analysis – Dennis Gilbert, Group
	Discussion to Include Initiative Topics: • Overall Project Administration/Governance/Steering Committee • Training • Global Standards Certification Pilot • Curriculum Transfer • Supply Chain • Occupational Forecast • Benchmarking • Scholarships • Internships • Occupational Toolkits • Symposium • Research Project(s) • External Evaluation • Outreach/Sustainability • Feasibility of Trade Organization
11 – 11:10 a.m.	Break
11:10 a.m.–12:05 p.m.	Lessons Learned Analysis – Dennis Gilbert, Group
12:05 – 12:30 p.m.	Break and Lunch (session continues at 12:30 - working lunch)
12:30– 2 p.m.	Lessons Learned Analysis (continued) – Dennis Gilbert, Group
2 – 2:10 p.m.	Break
2:10– 2:40 p.m.	Ranking Successes – Dennis Gilbert, Group
2:40 – 2:50 p.m.	Review and Consensus on Ranking – Dennis Gilbert, Group
2:50– 3 p.m.	Closing Discussion – Dennis Gilbert, Group

Session Guidelines

Charge to Participants:

- Everyone should contribute something, if only one idea or discussion item
- Listen to hear - one person speaks at a time
- Open discussion - think feedback, avoid criticism
- Stay curious and open to the perspective of others
- Add to others' comments and ideas to build clarity
- Think about interests, avoid taking positions

Guiding the Session:

Joint Responsibility

The success of this session is the joint responsibility of the facilitator and participants. Please help everyone meet the objectives of the session by having an open mind, asking appropriate questions, and providing feedback. Challenge the thinking of everyone and be sure to share your own.

Breaks

Breaks appear on the agenda with specific starting and ending times. The facilitator will do his best to keep the session on task and on time. The timelines provided serve as estimates and will likely be adjusted as the session progresses. Please be prepared to be physically and mentally present with the group during our time together. If you need to be absent from any activity or leave the session for any reason, please let the facilitator know so that no one worries about your health or safety.

Modeling

Each participant is encouraged to model effective group behavior by following the "charge to participants" guidelines.

Confidentiality

Every participant is encouraged to share their experiences, observations, and wisdom by providing specific examples and stories. Please support each other by keeping stories and examples confidential to this session. If you feel someone else's story would benefit others outside of this session, please: 1) get permission from the person who shared the example, and/or, 2) remove all information that could identify the organization or people involved. If you have any doubts about the confidentiality of something you are considering sharing outside of this session, refrain from sharing it.

Humor

Keeping a good sense of humor is critical for us to work together effectively. What we discuss and explore is very important, but at the same time we should not take ourselves too seriously or judge others harshly or unprofessionally. It helps keep our session flowing by enjoying our time together which may include laughter about ourselves or our struggles as we work together. Relax and together we can make our session both rewarding and fun!

Synopsis of Session

The session began with a welcome to the retreat center and introductions. Following introductions the agenda, session guidelines, and desired outcomes were reviewed. Frank Sorg provided some general background and overview of the Pennsylvania Plastics Initiative which set the stage for a more detailed discussion on specific projects within the initiative.

Attendees included:

Hank White – Plastics Manufacturing Center (PMC) – Penn College
Frank Sorg – Project Manager – PA Plastics Initiative
Alan Beily – McClarin Plastics
Todd Kennedy, Sr. – McClarin Plastics
Larry Michael – Penn College
John Johnston – Ben Franklin Technology Partners
Tim Weston – Penn College
Tim Franklin – The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State)
Mike Lawrence – Penn State
Jim Shillenn – IMC
Dennis Gilbert – *Facilitator* – Appreciative Strategies, LLC

Guests/Observers:

Tammy Coxen – Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)
Ed Strong – CSW

Via virtual attendance (A report prepared by Bill, commentary by Larry Michael):

Bill Brock – Central Pennsylvania Workforce Development Corporation

The session objectives were to solicit lessons learned during the statewide initiative and to identify or provide some recommendations on project components that were successful and that may prove beneficial to future partnership initiatives in plastics or other industrial sectors. Participants were strongly encouraged to identify the positive aspects, or successes, as well as objectively and diplomatically acknowledge actions or project components that were less successful or failed to meet expectations.

This report details successes and challenges for key grant objectives of the initiative. Many are summarized with discussion tables grouped into the categories of "what worked" and "what could be improved." Other smaller objectives were combined to form a single discussion and analysis table.

Overall Project Administration/Governance/Steering Committee

Facilitator comments:

This section was the first to be reviewed. As anyone can quickly imagine based upon the topic, this section provided the most discussion and overall was the most robust with information. In addition to Table 1, several additional items are noteworthy.

There was early discussion regarding the logic behind all of the grant activities, and it was noted that this grant by design was to take a holistic approach to promote industry competitiveness, beyond workforce development initiatives. Training represented a significant portion of the activity and some funding was allocated early to pursue the pilot of the Global Standards for Plastics Certification. It was further identified and discussed that decentralization was a challenge and that some strategic partners struggled if they were not already well acquainted with the plastics industry.

One significant comment brought forward was a discussion on funding agency metrics for improvement, as compared to industries metrics for improvement. For example, the funding agency may have a metric of employment increments (more workers) while industry is trying to reduce or maintain this metric. Industry must focus more on productivity and efficiency improvements and not try to increase headcount which is a metric for some supporting statewide funds.

Other significant discussion points included:

- Was support given to businesses that really had a strategic focus or companies that fit the academically defined mold?
- Considering the project manager, should this person be employed by the funding agency or by the program recipient? In this case, Labor & Industry and Penn State University.
- Remembering that industry is the customer.
- Should the funding agency be ready and willing to turn over responsibility to a "board" or steering committee model?

Additional commentary included the discussion of workforce development general practices and proactive businesses that as industry leaders consistently make technology investments. For example, Hank White indicated that through his observations businesses that are investing in their workforce and technology are doing well. This is in sharp contrast to those who have more of a commodity driven shorter-term focus. Jim Shillenn also added that in a recent study of innovative CEO's the differentiator for success was if the organization had a training budget. Comments of this nature provided meaningful dialog and value to the session.

Discussion Table 1 – Overall Project Administration/Governance/Steering Committee

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Good leadership (Frank) • Industry relationship building • Concept of having steering committee governance is a good model • "Board" model is good	• Steering committee (weak) lacked industry buy-in; improve the criteria used to pursue leadership • Consider ways to engage industry (differently); make technology investments that make it easier for industry to participate • Ways to help industry recognize the strategic value (not tactical) • Find better ways to market the CEO's for future involvement • Better communication to get more people involved • Shorten the lead time to activate the grant • Shorten the process involved in getting administration "up and running" • Engage industry sooner • "Fiscal" governance provided some additional difficulty

Training

Facilitator comments:

Training discussion centered on the framework, logistics, and overall intent. Discussions included that: 1) a company match was required, 2) that training was administered through the WIB's, 3) that consortium-based endeavors were encouraged, and 4) that the target was high-skill plastic manufacturing training. It was quickly pointed out that the number of people trained exceeded expectations.

Discussion Table 2 – Training

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Number of people trained exceeded expectations • Industry received training that they wanted • "Company-specific" training worked	• "Virtual Regional WIB" structure caused some difficulties (consortiums guided the WIB organization) • Some focus on developing consortiums slowed progress – initially • Consortia "partnership" training was not as effective as the "company specific" • No specific metrics in "general" training endeavors • No measurement for effectiveness – just dollars and headcount • Not enough sharing of best practices across WIB's

Global Standards for Plastics Certification (GSPC)

Facilitator comments:

This program received very positive comments and support from participants in the session. It was noted that the opportunity for industry (employers) to participate included a $10,000 cash match. A strongly noted side benefit to this pilot program was that it is helping industry in their recruitment efforts for employees. They can offer this opportunity for skill advancement and certification. Some businesses are also encouraging their suppliers to achieve certification.

Discussion Table 3 – GSPC

What Worked	**What Could Be Improved**
• As a pilot, it was a total success • One company asked their supplier to participate in the program • Exceeded all initial expectations • Industry has used GSPC as a recruiting tool • Adds value to the employees • May have helped in some capacity with pipeline issues	• Should consider extending throughout the State • In hindsight GSPC could have played a larger role in the overall project

Curriculum Transfer

Facilitator comments:

This project area was another that received high praise from the participants. The Plastics 101 course has been very positively received with numerous enrollments throughout the Commonwealth. The program can be accessed through the Plastics SourceNet Web site and has received strong interest from several community colleges. The objective of this project area was to make plastics curriculum more available in an effort to increase the pipeline. The group had no particular commentary on what could be improved.

Discussion Table 4 – Curriculum Transfer

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Plastics 101 course • All objectives were met • Exceeded all initial expectations • One community college embraced strongly (Lehigh Carbon Community College) • Has attracted some high school interest • Awareness has improved	*No specific comments*

Supply Chain/Occupational Forecast/Benchmarking

Facilitator comments:

Three shorter project areas were brought into one for discussion purposes (supply chain, occupational forecast, and benchmarking). Some commentary indicated that the pursuit of positive impact for the supply chain is very attractive, but it is unclear if there are any practical steps the Commonwealth can take to make an impact. One remark indicated that it may be useful for the Governors Action Team to be thoroughly briefed on this as they pursue economic development with supply chain businesses. One constructive idea was that the supply chain report and pursuit of action for impact could be enticing for the trade organization. Additionally, it was mentioned that the supply chain report should be disseminated to the industry.

The occupational forecast has been produced and is available on the Plastics SourceNet Web site. Targeted for WIB use, it is unclear if they are utilizing this forecast. Commentary included the notion that an entire project could be developed and built on this topic alone.

Benchmarking indicators are forthcoming.

Discussion Table 5 – Supply Chain/Occupational Forecast/Benchmarking

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• The outputs have a lot of interest and get strong support	• Collaboration with IRC's overall not strong but some were helpful • Occupational forecasting was designed for the WIB's, but it is unclear if the WIB's understand the most effective ways to utilize this output • "Noise level and buzz" are strong but what can really happen to make a difference

Scholarships

Facilitator comments:

This project item was originally set forth to make scholarships available to educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth. However, with very few institutions offering degree programs in plastics it became limited to just two institutions. Those institutions - Penn State Erie, The Behrend College, and the Pennsylvania College of Technology (Penn College) - shared in this opportunity. Due to a Behrend College focus on baccalaureate plastics programs, along with other factors, Penn College received most of the scholarships.

Receiving very positive discussion during the session, this item was viewed to be a strong success. One notable improvement would be for the window of opportunity to be longer. Recruiting of high school students into associate degree programs (length of lead time) and then the length of time in the program (2 years) led to a higher than normal attrition rate once funding was exhausted. Some students approaching the pipeline could not be served, and those already in the pipeline could only take advantage of the scholarship for part of their tenure in the program.

The biggest question for future action is: does industry really need these degreed individuals? Certainly the educational institutions are in strong support, but does industry care? In previous industry studies, it has been noted that a lack of a skilled workforce presented a significant challenge with pipeline issues ranked as a high concern from informal discussions with industry participating on the steering committee.

Discussion Table 6 – Scholarships

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Increased the number of students enrolled! • Good tool to recruit new students – served as a "magic bullet" • Colleges learned that significant increases in enrollment can be gained from scholarships	• Late start – getting organized • Fell slightly short of overall objective – goal was 100, achieved 85 • Recruitment time was too short – lead time needed for colleges to roll out is longer than the time allotted for scholarship promotion • Need more effort to create awareness; this activity could have been even better • An industry association could be a source for raising scholarship funds in the future

Internships

Facilitator comments:

Discussion on this area indicated mixed success and that some companies were reluctant to get involved. It was mentioned that the communication (outreach) for this activity was uneven throughout the State. Some WIB's were very interested in promoting while others were not. One suggestion for future endeavors is to further analyze the reasons that employers may be reluctant to engage in this type of activity.

Discussion Table 7 – Internships

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Money was not the driving issue • Some good success stories	• Communication was not effective everywhere, but some WIB areas were strong • Consider ways to redirect as a company in-kind contribution • Better alignment between WIB's and participating companies; WIB's perhaps did not feel a sense of ownership to promote • More direct contact with WIB's • Not as successful as was hoped • Should engage PA Department of Education

Occupational Toolkits

Facilitator comments:

Identified as a piece of the overall project charged with producing the Web site and providing a counselor package to help drive the students to the Web site, this area as a product was agreed to be very good. Challenges included how to roll it out and be more effective with creating awareness, following up, and marketing it to the right people. It was suggested that having the toolkits first and then having the scholarship opportunity as a continuance would be very effective.

Discussion Table 8 – Occupational Toolkits

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Hardcopy toolkit is good • Web site is even better than hardcopy • Was designed to create awareness and drive people to the Web site (www.imagineplastics.com) • Product good	• Toolkit didn't get to the right places • Toolkit should have been provided first then the scholarship • Communication out to the schools fell short • Product roll out

Symposium

Facilitator comments:

The Symposium was organized by the Industrial Resource Centers (IRC's) and Plastics SourceNet. According to the discussion, this project component changed somewhat from its original concept to evolve as an opportunity to provide insight into current or future issues that may affect their industry. Response from industry was positive but not as strong as desired. Discussions indicated that the event was well organized, had good speakers, and participants indicated interest in future events. Utilizing net revenues from this event as seed money, the expectation is that Plastics SourceNet will pursue promotion of a similar event in the year 2010.

Discussion Table 9 – Symposium

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Sponsorship dollars (net) forwarded for future events • Well organized – good speakers • Well planned and executed • Reviews were positive	• Promotions were substantial, but industry participation was softer than projected • Agenda was more closely aligned with "fiscal" goals and objectives and perhaps should have been better aligned with industry needs • How to connect with smaller companies for technology transfer • Participation from WIB's was not strong • Improve market target, appeared to be a focus on HR personnel and perhaps should have marketed CEO's more

Research Project(s)

Facilitator comments:

Research projects required a 1:1 cash match from participating businesses. Two businesses were selected from a competitive application process to take advantage of this opportunity. Discussion indicated that this activity was very successful and was modeled after some similar activities pursued in other industry clusters. Challenges still remain in getting industry engaged, even when funding opportunities are available.

Public institutions are not permitted to apply. This begs the question: is it targeted to help industry at large or is it targeted to help individual businesses?

Discussion Table 10 – Research Project(s)

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Research initiatives have worked in other partnerships, and this was another good example	• Resources to do projects are limited

External Evaluation

Facilitator comments:

Only a few moments of discussion occurred on this project area. It was duly noted that regarding the project at-large, engagement of an evaluator should have started earlier in the process. It seemed apparent that everyone agreed with the philosophy of evaluation, but that it should start at the very beginning, not in the middle or after significant work has begun.

Discussion Table 11 – External Evaluation

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
No specific comments	• Hiring of external resources for an evaluation should have occurred earlier in the project

Outreach/Sustainability

Facilitator comments:

Opening discussion on this area centered on how to get the financial resources to continue the pursuit. What project areas should be sustained, continued, or expanded? There was discussion that areas of focus should be on helping the industry in cost reduction, increasing innovation, and on environmental compliance. Other strong, more specific, areas of interest were the GSPC training program, the symposium, scholarships, and the pursuit of a trade organization.

Discussion Table 12 – Outreach/Sustainability

What Worked	What Could be Improved
• Symposium and networking • Global Standards for Plastics Certification • Keeping the Plastics SourceNet Web site alive	• How to engage the public workforce system • No cash – without money how do we continue

Feasibility of Trade Organization

Facilitator comments:

There appears to be some interest from industry in developing a trade organization, but it is unclear at this point if there is enough interest to move it from an informal "network" to a formal organization. It was reported during the discussion that approximately 50 to 70 businesses throughout the Commonwealth may have interest.

Discussion Table 13 – Feasibility of Trade Organization

What Worked	What Could Be Improved
• Some interest was discovered at the conclusion of the Symposium via a meeting to discuss feasibility • 100 companies were interviewed, 20 indicated some interest	• Feasibility study indicates that interest is not strong enough yet • Should continue to cultivate this concept

Results of Voting on Future Recommendations

Our final action item for the meeting was for the group, based upon discussion throughout the day and their familiarization with project outcomes, to place three votes on one to three project pieces that they would recommend to the State for future partnership activities. The discussion surrounding this voting process was that they should consider what they could recommend as activities for any statewide partnership in the future. Six items received votes which resulted in the ranking below:

	Project Component	**Votes**
1.	Global Standards (GSPC)	6
2.	Symposium	5
3.	Toolkits	4
4.	Internships	3
5.	Scholarships	2
6.	Research Projects	1

Ironically, there were no tie votes on project components. It is coincidence that they received decrements of one vote each as they appear in descending rank.

Closing Comments (Report)

This facilitated session brought together several of the original participants, steering committee members, and others. Designed to draw out the valuable project elements and to discuss "lessons learned," the session appeared to be a very valuable way to disseminate the entire project. During open discussion many strengths and weaknesses were shared while also having a focus on what pieces are valuable and appropriate to continue. Perhaps more importantly, the session helped to identify project pieces that are able to be replicated for future partnership activities in the plastics industry or other industry clusters. Enthusiasm for the continued pursuit was very strong from all of the participants.

Special Thanks To…

The Plastics Manufacturing Center (PMC) staff for organizing the meeting.

The Pennsylvania College of Technology for the use of their Morgan Valley Retreat Center and hospitality during the event.

Tammy Coxen from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce for sharing her in-depth collection of notes from the session; her contribution helped to enhance this report.