Community colleges can leverage technology to connect qualified talent to unfilled jobs.

Each February, ACCT and AACC release a “green sheet” of community college legislative priorities that determine the legislative agenda for that year. This year, workforce development was identified as one of these priorities, reflecting the critical role community colleges play in producing the talent that will help close America’s skills gap. In fact, community colleges are uniquely positioned in higher education to respond to this issue, given their focus on servicing non-traditional students like adult learners and veterans looking for immediate career placement. Yet in reality, community colleges are having trouble placing their graduates into fulfilling careers post-graduation.

Communities have open jobs that need to be filled with qualified workers, and community colleges have qualified talent that needs to be placed in jobs. Yet somehow, the two remain unconnected. How can we reconcile this reality and solve the gap between supply and demand for a local workforce?

This article will explore the ways in which community colleges and technology can address local industry needs for both immediate and long-term talent, while helping community college students find fulfilling post-graduation careers and closing the skills gap. To start, we will look at the skills gap itself, explaining the complex origin of a pervasive problem. Then, we will pose a potential solution — online “talent communities” built to foster communication between employers and qualified talent seeking job opportunities. Finally, we will highlight a talent community created to help veterans re-enter the workforce, showing the potential success technology can provide in helping close the skills gap.
Understanding the Skills Gap

A New York Times article, “Education and Training Has Not Kept Pace,” written by Celia Conrad, an economist and the vice president for academic affairs and the dean of Pomona College in California, describes the origin of the skills gap. Conrad writes:

The skills gap originated with the tectonic change in the economy that began in the 1970s: increased offshore competition for traditional manufacturing jobs and technological innovations that changed the content of remaining jobs. The comparative advantage of the United States in global markets shifted to knowledge-based, science and technology intensive activities, but our education and training infrastructure did not keep pace with the needs of these industries.1

In other words, a change in workforce needs and a corresponding failure to meet that change through appropriate education and training created the skills gap. Because of this, workforce-development activities were suddenly prioritized. The need for new types of education and training programs and an increased development of graduates with math and science-related skills and knowledge were put at the forefront of both Americans’ minds and educational directives.

Different solutions to closing the skills gap are being explored. The problem is complicated, but the solution does not have to be. Community colleges can leverage technology to close the skills gap.

Solving the Problem: Community Colleges and Technology

A recent report by the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program reveals an interesting insight: “Federal support of STEM education at the sub-bachelor’s level — such as community colleges — should be strengthened, considering a high number of [STEM jobs] require less than a bachelor’s degree.”2 In other words, many of these unfilled jobs, understood to need higher levels of training and education, actually require less. The report confirmed what many have long known: jobs that require less than a bachelor’s degree are a key part of the economy, and because of this, community colleges are uniquely positioned to provide the talent to fill those jobs.3

With the confirmation of the important role community colleges play in closing the skills gap, one question remains: How do we connect unemployed talent to unfilled positions? This is precisely where technology comes into play. Online “talent communities” — branded websites designed to connect qualified talent and employers around a common purpose (skills, industry, community, company) — are being built with the mission of bridging the communication gap between employers with open positions and qualified candidates seeking employment. When used in conjunction with a community college, a talent community provides the platform to connect graduates to meaningful work and assist community colleges in their role as the key player in closing the skills gap.

Case Study: U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Hiring our Heroes Initiative

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobless rates for U.S. military veterans have slowly declined, falling a full 1.3 percent in 2012.4 However, the current unemployment rate for veterans who served on active duty any time following September 2001 is still just under 10 percent.5

In response, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation set up a nationwide initiative called Hiring our Heroes to help veterans and military spouses find meaningful employment.6 The chamber partnered with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University to create Fast Track, a single online destination for military candidates to find jobs in high-demand employment regions and industries across the country, connect directly with employers, complete self-assessments, and identify critical career paths to designated occupations.

Elements of this talent community include:

• Mapping careers by industry/sector;
• Identifying qualifications needed for employment opportunities;
• Showing how to target the GI Bill for use at community colleges, vocational schools, and apprenticeships; and
• Credentialing programs to earn specific qualifications to land a job.

To close the skills gap, community colleges and employers must both understand the need and avenues through which that need can be met. Technology solutions such as talent communities can help facilitate this coordination by bridging the communication gap between these two entities.

To learn more about talent communities, attend “How to Close the Skills Gap with Online Talent Communities: A Network for Community Colleges to Meet Local Workforce Needs” at ACCT’s 2013 Leadership Congress in Seattle. If you are unable to attend the meeting, feel free to contact ConnectEDU Inc. Partner Marketing & Communications Manager Abby Zwier at azwier@connectedu.com.

2McVicar, Brian. Investing in STEM education at two-year colleges could fill skills gap, GRCC says.” MLive. MLive, 10 June 2013. Web.