

**A recent survey by Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute revealed 600,000 unfilled jobs in manufacturing due to a lack of qualified candidates. Why is there such a skills gap?**

**Lyons:** The integration of technology into the workplace has changed everything, and we see that particularly in manufacturing. Everything is moving into automation, but you still need a skilled labor force to operate that automated equipment. We find foundational skills are very often lacking. It's this lack of foundational and critical thinking skills that companies are talking about when they discuss the skills gap.

**Why are foundational skills needed much more now?**

**Lyons:** Technology is being integrated into every aspect of the work force. Workers are operating at a higher, more efficient level. When you create more efficiency in the work force, you need a worker with higher skills to do the job that interfaces with this technology.

**What other industries are most impacted by the skills gap?**

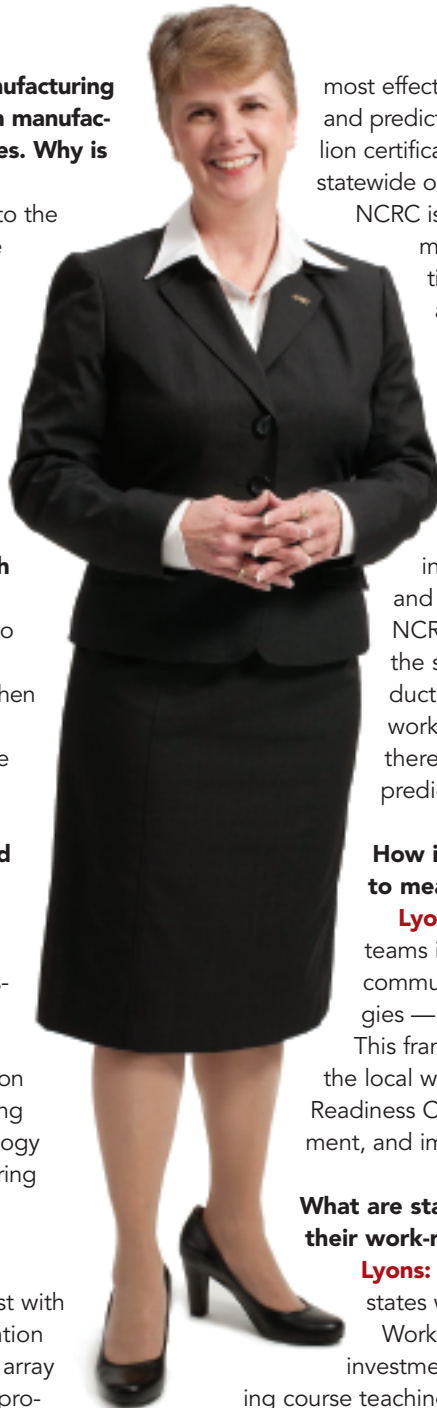
**Lyons:** Healthcare is impacted because you have a lot of paraprofessional jobs in the healthcare profession. The energy industry and the industrial construction industry also require a pretty sophisticated skills set. Technology is another, particularly information technology. Bioscience is a huge and growing area because it requires clean room technology and the integration of advanced manufacturing skills in almost every aspect of production.

**Tell us about ACT.**

**Lyons:** ACT is a not-for-profit public trust with a mission to help people succeed in education and in the workplace. We provide a broad array of assessments, research information, and program management solutions. ACT entered the work force development arena in the 1990s with WorkKeys assessments that were developed in direct response to the ongoing concern about America's global competitiveness. We wanted to address the gap between the knowledge and skills base of high school and college graduates — and adult learners — and the expectations of the workplace.

**What is the National Career Readiness Certificate?**

**Lyons:** In 2006, ACT introduced the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC), which is now recognized as the



most effective strategy for certifying workplace skills and predicting workplace success. More than 1.2 million certificates have been issued, and 40 states have a statewide or regional certificate program in place. The NCRC is comprised of three WorkKeys assessments: applied math, reading for information, and locating information. The NCRC is an evidence-based credential based on solving real-world workplace problems.

**How is the NCRC evidence-based?**

**Lyons:** ACT has five decades of test development expertise, and more than 20 years of job analysis data. We have a deep understanding of skill requirements in the workplace — and how to measure and close skill gaps with individuals. The NCRC is highly predictive when it comes to the success of a person being trained and productive on the job. We've done millions of workplace assessments over the years, and there's a great deal of evidence that shows the predictive capabilities of these assessments.

**How is ACT providing a national framework to measure core work readiness skills?**

**Lyons:** We are working with state leadership teams in helping build a framework that delivers community-based work force development strategies — ACT Certified Work Ready Communities. This framework will be based on criteria such as the local work force earning National Career Readiness Certificates, business and industry engagement, and improving high school graduation rates.

**What are states currently doing to implement their work-ready initiatives?**

**Lyons:** We've gotten tremendous response from states wanting to partner with us on our Certified Work Ready Community initiative. Part of ACT's investment is the CWRC Academy, a one-year training course teaching states how to implement these strategies. ACT is offering this to every state agency that wants to work with us to implement this strategy.

**What can employers do to help with work readiness?**

**Lyons:** We ask that they understand and recognize the NCRC. The business value to employers in having access to a qualified workforce is tremendous. And for a successful statewide CWRC effort, it will be essential for employers to have a consistent framework to engage in the skills gap conversation with educators and embrace the NCRC as the common language for workforce skill requirements.

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### What can educational institutions do to help?

**Lyons:** Bring WorkKeys and the NCRC into your high schools. Yes, you want to show that your students are prepared for college, but you also want to know they are prepared for work. Parents want to know their children are prepared for success. And, community and technical colleges can integrate this program into the career pathway work they are doing. Four-year colleges can find ways to work on current worker training and “skilling up” the existing workforce. The job profiling analysis tools provide a great foundation for developing training programs aligned to the needs of industry. The CWRC platform provides the opportunity for better linkages and alignment between education, business needs, and economic development.

### Do you have anything else to add?

**Lyons:** The quality of life in a community is dependent upon its ability to bring industry in and keep their doors open. I encourage state and government leadership teams to think about building a work force development framework that will help their communities thrive and prosper. This initia-

tive will give them irrefutable proof of the quality of their work force and engage their communities in collaborative work force development. It’s ACT’s contribution and commitment to help solve the skills gap problem in America.

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## THE ASSIGNMENT

Founded in 1959, and best known for the ACT college entrance exam, ACT, Inc. provides assessment research information and program management solutions to individuals and businesses nationally and internationally. The company, located in Iowa City, Iowa, works with middle and high schools, colleges, professional associations, employers, and government agencies on education and work force development. Debra Lyons, vice president for community and economic development in ACT’s Workforce Development Division, recently sat down with *Area Development* to discuss what states and businesses can do to help close the work skills gap.