



Interactive Videoconferencing Helps Job Seekers in South Central Wisconsin

About the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin

The Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin, Inc. is a non-profit agency working to make positive economic change in a six-county area. It is a one-stop workforce development connection for businesses, workers and community leaders. The board also collaborates with people and organizations throughout the region to make the area a better place to work and do business.

Situation

Rising unemployment greatly increased the number of clients seeking help from the One Stop Job Center System. The Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin is a vested partner in the Job Center System. Federal funding was not keeping pace with the increasing need for services, making it difficult to adequately staff the Job Centers. The Workforce Development Board needed a way to help its clients and customers, especially in more rural communities, without adding staff.

Solution

The Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin conducts job training and other seminars via videoconferencing services from AT&T. The interactive solution makes best use of available funds, enabling the board to expand its expertise to a broader audience.

Collaboration, Flexibility and Resource Sharing

Job seekers in the Badger State have an extraordinary resource in the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin, an organization that promotes economic opportunities for the workforce. Its board of directors is comprised of representatives from business and industry, government, nonprofit partners and the community at large.

Seth Lentz, Deputy Director, said the board's role is to build bridges and forge partnerships that strengthen the workforce. "The Board of Directors has employment and training resources, and they are partners in deciding where federal Workforce Investment Act resources are invested throughout the region," he said. "Working with a variety of public and private organizations really pushes the envelope on collaboration, maintaining flexibility, aligning resources and being able to serve a variety of populations."

Manufacturing is a driver industry in Wisconsin, along with healthcare, construction, agriculture and biotechnology. The board works with representatives of those industries and with high schools, colleges, technical schools and its workforce development partners to create training mechanisms to give job applicants relevant skills.

The Workforce Development System helps expanding industries by providing training to give workers additional skills to maintain the organization's competitiveness. When companies must reduce their workforce, the board helps to minimize the impact on affected workers by providing skills training and seminars on interviewing, budgeting and resume development. Some of this training is offered in Job Centers and some takes place at business sites.

Serving Triple the Job Seekers

Nationally, as unemployment began to spike, federal workforce investment funds began to shrink. "This made it difficult to adequately staff our job centers in each county," Lentz said. The board began researching ways to serve increasing numbers of people without adding to its staff.

Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin Facts

- **Business Needs**
Provide service to growing numbers of unemployed people without adding to job center staff
- **Networking Solution**
Interactive videoconferencing gives job seekers in remote locations access to orientations and training sessions
- **Business Value**
Enhanced use of available funds; ability to help a broader audience of unemployed people
- **Industry Focus**
Nonprofit workforce development agency
- **Size**
Over 90,000 clients served annually



“We saw that interactive videoconferencing could allow us to gain efficiency as well improve access to services,” he said. The Board has implemented seven rooms over the last few years and is in the process of adding three more. These are a combination of fully managed facilities where AT&T provides scheduling and bridging services and user managed facilities that have more basic capabilities and tend to be on the receiving end of presentations. The scheduling, bridging service, and transport is provided as part of the State of Wisconsin’s Badgernet Converged Network (BCN) and is managed by AT&T. The BCN provides video, data and voice throughout the state.

Throughout its six-county region, the board has staff that is more knowledgeable about one topic than another. Rather than sending the best presenters on each topic to each county, the board deploys interactive videoconferencing. “Now a presentation is delivered from one location and simultaneously reaches clients in our other locations. The solution gives us the ability to expand the scope of our expertise to a broader audience,” Lentz said. It also saves travel costs and makes the best use of resources.

The timing of the Workforce Development Board’s video implementation could not have been better. Just as its staff was learning the most effective ways to use videoconferencing, Wisconsin began to feel the effects of the worldwide recession, and the number of workers seeking help more than tripled. “Last year, we had over 90,000 people in the job center system in our area,” Lentz said. “With all of the job dislocations, the floodgates really opened so videoconferencing became a survival tool for us in the face of a huge increase in the volume of people in need of service.”

The organization’s board of directors was adamant about helping everyone who turned to the Workforce Development Board. “We needed to figure out some solutions to be able to give people access to service,” Lentz said. Videoconferencing was tailor-made to meet the Workforce Development Board’s needs. Whereas in the past an orientation to Job Center services might be conducted in a room for 15 people, now it’s a presentation to 50 people in six different rooms. “Videoconferencing gave us the scale to be able to deal with the volume that we were experiencing,” Lentz said.

Clients have been receptive to the video presentations. “We actually had individuals coming to our locations because they couldn’t get access to services in their home area. This allowed us to expand the number of individuals we can serve. Our board and the private sector members were very pleased with that.”

Saving Time and Money

The Workforce Development Board also uses videoconferencing to conduct internal meetings and training sessions. Case managers, who provide career advice to clients, use the technology to meet with individuals and partner agencies, and the board of directors uses it to conduct some of its meetings. “We use it every single day between staff meetings, worker orientations and career advising,” Lentz said.

“Our partners have commended us for being innovative and finding this solution,” he said. A few local employers have even made use of the board’s videoconferencing setup to conduct job interviews, saving time and travel expenses.

Technical colleges have used videoconferencing systems to provide training for associate degree programs and adult basic skill development such as GED preparation. The Workforce Development Board also collaborates with the colleges to provide specialized training to prepare candidates for a job in which they have to refresh their familiarity with a certain subject. It looks to utilize this technology in other ventures with its technical college partners.

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– Seth Lentz, Deputy Director, Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin

Statewide Recognition of Success

“The ability to continue to provide services given the huge volume of individuals is a great benefit,” Lentz said. “We would have struggled significantly and it would have been difficult to provide orientations to the number of individuals that we did without the videoconferencing. It just wouldn’t have happened.”

Wisconsin lawmakers have begun building on this success, approving a plan to deploy interactive videoconferencing to the other 10 Workforce Development Boards. “The fact that the Wisconsin legislature identified \$750,000 to move to a statewide platform to me is a pretty big success,” he said. “This could allow us to share presentations and provide access to services throughout the state, well beyond our six-county area.”

Several other Workforce Development Boards have visited South Central Wisconsin to learn how to use videoconferencing technology in their operations. “We also had some local legislators who recognized our efforts and helped to support it when it was up for endorsement,” he said.

Lentz gives credit to AT&T for its assistance in designing and providing the videoconferencing network. “It’s not within my realm of expertise to design and engineer a room,” he said. “AT&T has been great. They’ve helped us in a technical capacity and even helped us coordinate the ordering and installation of the equipment.”

The board also counted on AT&T to assist in troubleshooting its new system and conducting staff training on how to use the technology. “We have been fortunate that we have good partners to help us, because this was way outside the scope of our expertise,” he said.

Meeting Ongoing Needs

Workforce Development Board officials believe the need for videoconferencing will continue to increase. "Workers are going to have to upgrade their skills in order to maintain workplace relevance," Lentz said. "We recognize that there is a significant growth in middle-skill jobs that require education beyond a high school diploma but maybe not a full technical or bachelor's degree." The board is working to prepare workers to take advantage of these new opportunities.

It also has begun looking at ways to collaborate with Wisconsin's other Workforce Development Boards as they begin deploying videoconferencing. "Going forward we will look to diversify our offerings," Lentz said. "For instance, we plan use the infrastructure to offer more computer-based and technical skill training."

The South Central board also hopes to use the video network to assist local businesses. "We'd like to look at how we might further provide access to some of our business partners," he said. "There is a lot of potential to save costs by utilizing the technology while at the same time improving access to services."

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