

## Workplace skills test could help fill jobs

By Dave Alexander  
dalexander@muskegonchronicle.com

HUDSONVILLE — Those interested in applying for maintenance positions currently open with Cole's Quality Foods in Muskegon should fill out an application and include a National Career Readiness Certificate.

A what?

A National Career Readiness Certificate.

Cole's is joining a growing number of West Michigan companies and organizations that are using the American College Testing company's standardized workplace skills assessment tool.

Like the well-known ACT test for college-bound high school students, the Iowa-based nonprofit testing organization has a test to evaluate the work skills of prospective new hires and current employees. And the results may determine how much money an employee makes.

More than 13,000 U.S. jobs have been assessed to see what level of certificate is needed.

The ACT certificate program is being embraced by West Michigan WIRED — the \$15 million federally funded effort to modernize the region's work force development initiatives. Spearheaded by the West Michigan Strategic Alliance, there have been more than 11,700 certificates granted and 202 West Michigan companies committed to using the assessment test since WIRED began here in 2006. West Michigan comprises a seven-county area.

"Here in West Michigan, you are leading on a national level in embracing the National Career Readiness Certificate program," ACT Chief Executive Officer Dick Ferguson told the annual West Michigan Strategic Alliance "state of the region" gathering Wednesday at the Pinnacle Center in Hudsonville.

WIRED's goal is to have 500 employers commit to the ACT workplace assessment program by the end of the year, said Greg Northrup, president of the West Michigan Strategic Alliance.

Cole's Quality Foods Human Resources Director Karen Frazier said she has been sold on the National Career Readiness Certificates since they first were introduced in Iowa when the West Michigan-based garlic bread producer expanded its operations there.

### ► TEST from 1A

Besides Cole's, companies and organizers to sign on early with the ACT program include Bayer Crop Science and Muskegon Community College in Muskegon County, Light Corp. and the Grand Haven Board of Light & Power in Ottawa County and the Fremont Area Community Foundation and the county in Newaygo.

"In our new plant in Iowa, we used them and I was very excited to hear that they were coming to West Michigan," Frazier said of the certificates.

The ACT certificates will set a standard for new hires at Cole's and the company is discussing using them with existing employees through negotiations with Teamsters Local 406, which represents workers in Cole's Muskegon plant that employs 155.

"The union leadership has been very open and excited about the program," Frazier said. "This is a national certificate. Our employees can take the certificate anywhere in the country if they are seeking a new job."

The National Career Readiness Certificates are based on three of eight ACT "WorkKeys" — applied math, locating information and reading for information. The three tests are combined for a score that rates a worker in either the bronze, silver or gold categories. A "gold" certificate holder would have the skills needed for 90 percent of the more than 13,000 jobs rated by ACT, company officials said.

The ACT's Ferguson said the higher the work skills, the higher the test scores and subsequently the higher level of work and pay the certificate holder can obtain in the job market.

For example, a bronze certificate holder with scores of 3 out of 7 for the three WorkKeys could be qualified to be a truck or tractor operator, paying \$26,750 a year on average. But a 5 on each of the three WorkKey tests would yield a gold certificate, which is needed to be a first-line construction trades supervisor, making on average \$50,980 a year.

Bayer Crop Science in Muskegon is in the process of hiring more than six new employees and all will have to have a minimum gold level certificate, Northrup said.

WIRED initially has worked through the Kent and Ottawa intermediate school districts to provide a third WorkKey test for all their students since the first two WorkKeys already are tested by ACT on the standardized Michigan Merit Exam. The Muskegon Area Intermediate School District also plans to get involved in the testing, Northrup said.

West Michigan's Michigan Works! work force development centers can provide the National Career Readiness Certificate testing process. A Cole's applicant without an ACT certificate would be sent to a Michigan Works! office for testing.

Muskegon County centers have granted 297 certificates, Ottawa 236 and Newaygo 89 in the first three months of this year, the alliance reports.

WIRED, which has several other initiatives outside the ACT certificates, will end its three-year grant period in early 2009. The West Michigan Strategic Alliance has a plan for a \$60 million continuation of the National Career Readiness Certificate program in the region through 2017, when the goal is to have 100 percent of the West Michigan population with the opportunity to earn the ACT certificate.

"Our goal is to make West Michigan a leading region when it comes to having a talented pool of local employees for the next generation of companies," Northrup said.