



## It's all about skills

A source told us recently about a rural South Carolina county where a new company came in and created 300 jobs.

Sounds good, except for the fact that only about five of those jobs were filled by county residents. The rest were filled by commuters and new arrivals.

Why? For the most part, county residents didn't have the necessary skills to work at the new employer. Just a little anecdote to think about as we continue talking about the need for the Upstate to embrace the "knowledge economy."

In recent weeks, we have listened to two discussions related to the Upstate work force. One was sponsored by the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce and the other was held by WorkLink, which handles Workforce Investment Board initiatives in Anderson, Oconee and Pickens counties. Both forums addressed the rising importance of individual skills in the economy.

Julia Hoyle of WorkLink points out that in 1955, 60 percent of jobs were unskilled. In 2005, 68 percent of jobs were skilled.

It is becoming more and more obvious that our overall education system is lagging behind the trends that are shaping the future economy. Politics and bureaucracy will undermine all the florid talk about a knowledge economy unless the business community forces change upon that system.

One way to force change is for businesses to become a participant in the system as a vocal consumer of educated workers. That's the programs that work and demand more funding for their expansion. Offer loud, constructive criticism of education practices that don't work - and don't keep re-electing the same slate

of school board and General Assembly good ol' boys that have failed to improve the system.

WorkLink touts several programs that can help improve workers' skills. It also promotes WorkKeys, which measures employability based on skills such as applied mathematics, locating information and reading for information.

Bob Brown of the S.C. Employment Security Commission knows that many businesses use WorkKeys in hiring, but he says it may also be worth using with existing employees. There's no point in letting current workers' skills languish, although that sometimes happens as human resources pours its attention into new hires.

Workers should also keep in mind that new economic realities give them a great deal of leverage when it comes to changing jobs, or even careers. But that cuts both ways. Lifelong learning will no longer be a hobby for affluent retirees, but a requirement for all adults who want to maintain their standard of living.

Workers need to demand resources from employers and the education system that will help them remain competitive.

To close, a brighter anecdote. Consider Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Co. in Pickens County. Pickens has a reputation for outmigration commuting - residents who drive outside the county because there aren't enough jobs to support the local population.

Reliable's HR manager, Roger Powell, says the company is a heavy user of Workforce Investment Act resources. The company employs 600 workers, with 500 coming from within Pickens County.