

## **BUILDING THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WORKFORCE BY ASSESSING SKILLS AND IMPROVING CURRICULA: ACT WORKKEYS**

ACT WorkKeys is an assessment system designed to measure the skills that employers have identified as crucial to success in today's work environment. WorkKeys is used in different ways by a number of different audiences. For example, educators can use WorkKeys to assess whether students are gaining the foundational skills necessary for success in the workplace, and to identify necessary curricular changes. Individuals can assess whether they have the skills necessary for certain jobs, and can identify areas in which they might need to improve. Employers can use WorkKeys to assess the skill levels of applicants and current employees to strengthen their hiring and training programs.

There are three components to WorkKeys, which can be used independently but are designed to be used in concert.

- **Skills Assessments:** WorkKeys assessments measure “foundational workplace skills” in the ten areas of applied mathematics, applied technology, business writing, listening, locating information, observation, readiness, reading for information, teamwork, and writing. The assessments are available in both computer-based and paper-based formats.<sup>1</sup>
- **Job Analysis:** The WorkKeys system includes processes to determine what types of skills are needed for success in a particular job. The most intensive process is called job profiling, which involves focus groups and employee collaboration. The types of jobs that have been profiled by WorkKeys include manufacturing, healthcare, law enforcement, hospitality and a range of white-collar professional jobs such as accountants and Web masters.
- **Training:** ACT offers a variety of training options, many of which focus on WorkKeys skills. In addition, ACT certifies training programs offered by other organizations that align with the WorkKeys goals.

Ideally, information about an individual's skill level would be combined with the skills identified as necessary by a job profile, allowing individuals and employers to make informed decisions about appropriate careers and education.

States can use WorkKeys to give their citizens “portable credentials,” which help employers determine whether a person has the right skills and can help schools and colleges understand the skills needed in the job market. Virginia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Indiana, North Carolina, and New Mexico already have such programs.

In Kentucky, for example, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) and the state's Cabinet for Workforce Development collaborated to create the Kentucky Employability Certificate using WorkKeys assessments. Individuals can earn an Employability Certificate by taking the Reading for Information, Applied Math, and Locating Information assessments. The state established a tiered system for the

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<sup>1</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.” ACT WorkKeys. Accessed May 1, 2006, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/overview/faq.html#what>.

credential. Individuals earning a score of four on all three tests are awarded a Silver Certificate, and those scoring five or above on all three receive a Gold Certificate. A third certificate is occupation-specific and is based on the skills identified in a job profiling exercise.<sup>2</sup>

The Owensboro Medical Health System is one example of a Kentucky-based employer that is using WorkKeys. Owensboro created a skill-enhancement program targeting staff ranging from nurses and physical therapists to maintenance positions. The hospital reports that employee skill levels have improved, as measured by post-testing, and turnover has been reduced by 32 percent.<sup>3</sup>

A number of states are starting to use WorkKeys to assess both college and workplace readiness. Five states (Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) piloted the use of WorkKeys assessments to test the skills of their two-year college students as a part of the National Forum on College-Level Learning. The pilot measured students' skills in reading for information, applied mathematics, locating information, and business writing.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in 2007, Michigan will require that all of its eleventh graders take an exam called the Michigan Merit Exam, which will combine the ACT Plus Writing exam with the WorkKeys assessments for Applied Math and Reading for Information (in 2001, both Colorado and Illinois started giving the ACT's college entrance exam to all eleventh graders to assess their college readiness).<sup>5</sup> High school juniors in Wyoming will be able to take WorkKeys and the ACT college entrance exam for free starting in 2007. Students taking WorkKeys will be eligible for a career scholarship for community colleges, and students taking the ACT will be eligible for scholarships at either the University of Wyoming or a state community college.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, new legislation passed in 2006 in Kentucky will require all high school juniors to take the ACT college entrance exam so that they can identify any areas of weakness and choose their senior year courses wisely. Students who are not college-bound can also take the WorkKeys assessments used for the Kentucky Employability Certificate. Their WorkKeys scores will be reported on their high school transcripts.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Kentucky Employability Certificates Expand the Use of WorkKeys® Statewide." *Activity*, 40.2, Spring 2002, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/reprints/kentucky.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "WorkKeys for Healthcare is Just What the Doctor Ordered." *Activity*, 43.3., Autumn 2005, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/autumn2005/workkeys.html>; "Boosting Health Care Employees' Skills and Promotion Opportunities Content Area." WorkKeys Case Studies, June 2004, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/case/owensboro.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, Margaret A. and Peter T. Ewell. *Measuring Up on College-Level Learning*. San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> "Michigan Joins Ranks of States Offering the ACT to All." *Activity*, 44.1, Winter 2006, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/winter2006/michigan.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. "Requirement for High School Juniors to Take ACT." April 17, 2006. Accessed May 8, 2006, [http://cpe.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/E52BA147-5A8F-4493-8FA3-24299920964B/0/B3\\_RigorousHSCurriculumandACT.pdf](http://cpe.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/E52BA147-5A8F-4493-8FA3-24299920964B/0/B3_RigorousHSCurriculumandACT.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. "Requirement for High School Juniors to Take ACT." April 17, 2006. Accessed May 8, 2006, [http://cpe.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/E52BA147-5A8F-4493-8FA3-24299920964B/0/B3\\_RigorousHSCurriculumandACT.pdf](http://cpe.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/E52BA147-5A8F-4493-8FA3-24299920964B/0/B3_RigorousHSCurriculumandACT.pdf); Schreiner, Bruce. "ACT to be Required for

### **BENEFITS OF USING WORKKEYS FOR EDUCATION**

- Identify gaps between student skills and employment needs
- Align curricula to meet the job skills employers need
- Develop more efficient teaching strategies
- Improve students' success in entry-level and subsequent jobs
- Increase chances that graduates will be hired<sup>8</sup>

Source: "WorkKeys for Education." ACT WorkKeys. Accessed May 1, 2006, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/overview/education.html>.

### **BENEFITS OF USING WORKKEYS FOR BUSINESS**

Companies that use the WorkKeys system to assess their incoming and current workforce typically achieve substantial benefits, including:

- Improved employee selection and advancement procedures
- Reduced overtime
- Reduced turnover
- Increased productivity
- Fewer legal challenges over hiring processes
- Higher employee morale
- Increased job satisfaction
- Improved teamwork
- Increase in product and/or service quality
- Union support<sup>9</sup>

Source: "WorkKeys for Business: Unlock the Potential in Your Workforce." ACT WorkKeys. Accessed May 1, 2006, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/overview/business.html>.

WorkKeys also offers a WorkKeys Proficiency Certificate for Teacher Assistants that helps school districts to meet the No Child Left Behind requirement that teacher assistants demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. At least 19 states are using WorkKeys for this purpose.<sup>10</sup> In the summer of 2005, ACT released its first industry-specific skills assessment system for healthcare. The hope is that hospitals and other healthcare employers will use the system for hiring and professional development, and educational institutions will also use it to assess their curricula and their graduates' skill levels.<sup>11</sup> WorkKeys has been translated into Spanish, and ACT also offers an English

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High School Juniors." *Lexington Herald-Leader, Kentucky.com*, April 12, 2006. Accessed May 8, 2006, <http://www.kentucky.com/mld/kentucky/news/legislature/14321957.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> "WorkKeys for Education." ACT WorkKeys. Accessed May 1, 2006, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/overview/education.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "WorkKeys for Business: Unlock the Potential in Your Workforce." ACT WorkKeys. Accessed May 1, 2006, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/overview/business.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "Paraprofessional Assessment Package Meets NCLB Requirements." *Activity*, 41.1, Winter 2003, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/winter2003/profcert.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "WorkKeys for Healthcare is Just What the Doctor Ordered." *Activity*, 43.3., Autumn 2005, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/autumn2005/workkeys.html>.

WorkKeys system to help employers assess employees' English proficiency. So far, this program operates in Spain, Italy and France.<sup>12</sup>

**FURTHER INFORMATION**  
1-800-WORKKEY  
[www.act.org/workkeys/index.html](http://www.act.org/workkeys/index.html)

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<sup>12</sup> “¿Usted No Habla Inglés? ¿Y Quiere Trabajar? Hispanic Applicants Demonstrate Skills with Spanish WorkKeys.” *Activity*, 42.1, Winter 2004, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/winter2004/spanish.html>; “English WorkKeys Expands to France and Italy.” *Activity*, 44.1, Winter 2006, Accessed May 4, 2006, <http://www.act.org/activity/winter2006/engworkkeys.html>.