Findings

Based on the rating scale used to measure difficulty in finding employees in certain occupational areas (one being very low and five being very high), optics and imaging firms in the Finger Lakes EDD have a less than average difficulty in finding employees with basic skills and IT skills. There is greater difficulty in finding employees with non-IT production skills (machinists and electricians) and scientists, engineers, and managers. Still, the average ranking in these two occupational areas across all firms responding to the survey was slightly above average (2.6).

Given the high percentage of workers hired from the local labor market across all skill levels, local workforce development activities appear to be meeting firms' minimum needs as indicated by difficulty levels in finding employees across all skill levels. However, the survey responses indicate that future skill requirements will increase over the next five years. Familiarity with and perceived quality of training provided (as determined by the survey) will have to increase particularly in non-academic institutions and organizations. Industry expertise will also require upgrades across all training providers.

The purpose of cluster-based economic development is to provide an economy of scale in resource investment. Currently, firms themselves provide the largest share of training in the four skill areas not including literacy among all training providers. Firms provide training specific to their individual operations, processes, and production methods. Cluster specific or even multi-industry specific training would provide better benefits at similar or lower costs. Optics and imaging firms in the Finger lakes EDD have indicated that they expect to spend more on training in the coming years and have expressed a willingness to invest in skill areas that could have training programs tailored to the needs of several industries in conjunction. Additionally, there is an interest in exploring "regional skills alliances" that include groups of employers, educational institutions, and other training providers (both public and private) similar to those in other parts of the nation.

There are currently 13 Centers for Advanced Technology (CAT) across New York State that provide benefits and support through research and training programs. As opposed to financial assistance, these CATs furnish technical assistance that provides greater accessibility for firms of all employment class sizes and could serve as a forum for networking and joint ventures among groups of businesses and academia. In the Finger Lakes EDD, the University of Rochester and Rochester Institute of Technology serve as the CAT for electronic imaging. Another factor is the development of Workforce Investment Boards that include greater involvement from the private sector and are replacing the Private Industry Councils.

Overall, new avenues for increased training opportunities and better return on investment for workforce development activities are needed for the optics and imaging cluster in the Finger Lakes EDD. ESD and the G/FLRPC can and should continue to work with county and local economic development and workforce development departments and industrial development agencies to create a more qualified pool of available labor in the optics and imaging cluster.