Workforce Issues Discussion

11/6/2023

1:00PM - 2:30PM

Lee County Economic Development Office

Fort Myers, FL

Attending:

Christopher Bernier

Christina Castellanos

Peg Elmore

Guido Minaya

Tifarah Pardue

Whitney Rhyne

Commissioner Ray Sandelli

Wayne Smith

Mark Stevens

John Talmage

Evelyn Valdes

Michael Wukitsch

**Meeting Notes**

**Introductions -**

The meeting began with introductions. Everyone went around the room and stated their name, title, and organization they are affiliated with.

**Opening Remarks -**

Mr. Smith thanked everyone for being present. He invited each of the attendees to share a few thoughts on the current state of hiring, workforce issues, organizational challenges, and achievements.

**Roundtable Discussion -**

Dr. Minaya began the roundtable discussion by speaking about his experience managing a corporate workforce. What is often the case in the corporate realm is scale and speed; how can we leverage technology to scale quickly? He has seen success with blended learning environments, where some components of employee training can be supplemented with virtual components to ease the burden and time of classroom instruction. Dr. Minaya provided an anecdote from his employees in India, where they have created a pipeline centered around early intervention, assessment, and instruction that ends with being matched with an employer upon program completion. It is a fully integrated system that reinforces and reassesses the student along the entire process to encourage the highest rate of success when being matched with an employer.

Ms. Castellanos began by thanking the group for some of the strongest partnerships she has witnessed recently, especially with the success of the supply chain management and logistics programs coming from the education partners. She said Arthrex has been facing many of the same issues with retaining their workforce as other major employers in the area. The high cost of living and lack of affordable housing were the top-cited issues when workers left; employees said they could not afford to remain in the area. Arthrex had to adapt by offering remote work options for positions where it was feasible; pointing out those positions were often the lowest paid entry-level type of positions. Ms. Castellanos pointed out that there seems to be no incentive for young people coming out of FGCU to stay in the region. She suggested that young people are looking beyond what their employer can offer in the form of benefits, that they are looking for a sound quality of life in an affordable area.

Ms. Pardue stated how committed FGCU is on the non-credential components of education. She said connecting students to local employers is the toughest part of the job as that is the part that adds the most value. FGCU maintains a strategy where they try to connect people to employers, other services or resources to try to keep students local.

Ms. Rhyne spoke about how important it was that the programs created in our institutions match the workforce needs of our local employers. She was very proud that 59 of the 60 programs offered at FSW directly address workforce needs, and that 90% of their graduates stay in the area. She said that they are proud as an institution to know that they have such a strong connection to local employers and play a pivotal role in the region. Ms. Rhyne said FSW has been trying to identify ways to break down larger credentials into smaller chunks so that students have the ability to gain marketable skills and obtain jobs as they move along their programs. She said reinforcing and expanding this pipeline is key.

Mr. Wukitsch stated he is worried about the area’s labor participation rate. Lee Health is Lee County’s largest employer with over 14,000 full-time employees. They directly compete with other major regional health provider for workers. The primary issue they face is wage inflation in the industry and in the region as they are forced to compete. He said Gen Z are the toughest demographic to attract as they have much higher standards on the types of jobs and work conditions they will take. He believes the key to attracting younger workers is building social communities they can be a part of to get them to stay; many of them are looking for something to do or people to network with to advance their careers, and we may be able to at least offer them that. Recent hiring trends have swapped so that there are more in-state recruits over out-of-state applicants; the majority seems to be moving in to follow family. There is opportunity in the industry to explore advanced technologies as a way to augment the work being done by a limited workforce; keeping an eye on these new technologies and seeing how they can be utilized to support current workers may be a solution that can ease the pressure of being short-staffed to help employee burnout and retention.

Mr. Stevens provided an update on the construction industry. He said the county has been fortunate in the amount of interest and work in the region, and as a result they have experienced significant worker shortages. Construction projects are becoming stalled with the combined lack of workers, inflated supply costs, and the lack of new capital entering the market with interest rates getting higher. Mr. Stevens spoke to the problem of hiring within the trades. There is a misperception amongst young people on how much you can make working in the trades versus going to college and getting a job.

Commissioner Sandelli began by telling a story of his career and how he was always advised in life to follow his passion. That same sentiment is what he goes on to tell his children and the people he mentors. Passion in your work is how you stay in your job and want to continue working. He believes there may be a shift that is happening culturally with young people, where their passion may not necessarily be their work. The question then becomes, do they have an opportunity to find their passion? And if so, how can we help them access that passion while also supporting them at their job? Commissioner Sandelli brought up the topic of immigrants entering the workforce. He commented that conditions have not been friendly lately to immigrant workers who are interested in bettering their lives and entering the workforce. They are hard workers who want to help themselves, their families, and their communities. He asked the group to consider the question: how we can match the skills of immigrants with local jobs?

Ms. Elmore provided highlights on the various projects CareerSource of SWFL offers. All of their work can only be done with the strong public-private partnerships in place between the educational institutions and the private industries, working together and with CareerSource to create the pathways each member has so far mentioned. Targeting younger workers has always been a challenge; there is a cultural shift occurring and our difficulties may be stemming from the problem that we may be asking the wrong question. Instead of asking what occupation do you want to pursue, we should be asking them what kind of problems do you want to solve in the future? Ms. Elmore asked the group to consider the skills of refugees and the opportunities immigrant workers provide. She reiterated the sentiments of Commissioner Sandelli that there are hard workers available to us, but there are significant barriers for them based on their language and limited access to community resources. Combining ESOL instruction with their technical training opportunities and blending learning techniques with real-world hands-on experience. Ms. Elmore acknowledged the significant cost to employers on training a new worker, let alone a new worker with limited language or skills capabilities.

Dr. Bernier stated there remains a shortage of educators in Lee County, an issue not unique to our school district. The School District has reviewed and is considering implementing changes that would ease the burden of the high cost of living, beginning with entry level positions. Even so, there remains a significant number of vacant classrooms in the district. The ability for a worker to understand a job’s value, know what their responsibilities are and how to meet them are some of the hardest skills to gain. He asked the group to consider the design of instruction; we need to make considerations and constantly reevaluate which classes and courses are required to graduate. The majority of classes required to graduate are geared toward preparing students for college. There is also a programmatic opportunity presented with how educators are expected to teach students. The majority of educators come from a background of being trained in education, meaning they may not necessarily be aware of all the issues occurring in the world outside of the classroom. Is there a way to connect educators to employers and create a hybrid form of instruction that also allows educators to implement some of these real-world lessons into the classroom?

Ms. Valdes began by providing an anecdote. The issues discussed in the room are not unique to the entities or industries represented today. It is evident in the data. Every industry in Lee County is projecting a 1 - 3% annual growth rate every year for the next five years, resulting in a significant demand for new workers to fill those positions. Ms. Valdes pointed out that it is a tall task to pick and choose which project goes first with each of our limited resources, but to rejoice in the fact that the current demand found across all industries is an opportunity in itself; regardless of the choice, it will be

helping someone in our community. The data can provide the guidance necessary to make that choice.

Mr. Talmage stated the following statistics: Lee County has a prime age (25-55) labor participation rate of 82%, higher than the national average, coupled with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state. The group is already working with those workers who are currently in-between jobs or are looking for jobs. The 18-24 and 56+ populations, however, are supremely underrepresented in the labor force. There needs to be a focus on quality of life as a reason to stay in the region. Many workers come down here first as visitors but stay for the quality of life and affordability. However, those components are currently threatened. Lee County has some of the highest worker commute times in the country. Public infrastructure improvements are imperative to address commute times that affect quality of life and increase household costs. Housing can be built surrounding current and future job nodes, with affordable options on the table. The economy is diversifying, in turn creating strong verticals that are allowing people to stay here locally as opposed to having to move for better opportunities within their related industries. Strengthening each of those verticals, educating our workforce every step of the way, and connecting our future workforce to tap into those opportunities is the ideal pipeline we can create.

**Concluding Remarks and Next Steps -**

Mr. Smith thanked the group for all their comments and insights. He attested to the work each of the organizations have already been doing and continue to do. It is simply a matter of keeping each other informed on how else we can help the other as we all have similar goals. Mr. Talmage said there might be an opportunity for action with the recent initiatives from the state and asked Peg to explain.

Ms. Elmore explained Florida Senate Bill 240 contains a provision that each CareerSource region will need to create an education and industry consortium that must meet to provide information on identified community or industry career and education gaps to the Workforce Development Board (WDB). This consortium would make the current process much more data driven. Ms. Elmore stated this committee would be a good opportunity to shape some clear direction and establish goals.

No further comments.

**Adjourn.**