

WORKFORCE ISSUE/SOLUTION SUMMARY

2018 COHASE ECONOMIC SUMMIT

This document is an attempt to summarize many of the comments related to regional workforce issues and possible solutions. These comments were made during the 2018 Cohase Chamber of Commerce Economic Summit held on Monday, December 3, 2018 at River Bend Career & Technical Center. Most of these comments came from the public forum portion of the event but some were also obtained from conversations immediately following the event. This is intended to be a working document and will be amended and edited as needed when/if feedback is provided. The Issues and Solutions here are presented in no particular order or priority.

Please note that this is a summary of diverse comments from the Summit. Neither the Cohase Chamber Commerce nor all event attendees are necessarily in agreement with or in support of all comments or potential solutions documented here.

TOP WORKFORCE ISSUES

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT

Area employers continue to experience issues attracting and retaining talent from outside our region. Comments at this summit centered around highly skilled medical personnel, including specifically nurses and doctors but other employers have also vocalized similar issues in the past. These issues, as identified by applicants, employees or their family members include:

- Lack of high-speed internet and/or cell service in many areas of our region, specifically where people were considering purchasing or renting homes.
- Concerns about sufficient activities and facilities for youth and teens
- Concerns about good paying employment opportunities for spouses/partners of applicants/employees
- Concerns about civic and social integration into the regional communities

“WORK ETHICS” AND/OR “VIEW OF WORK” FOR YOUNG WORKERS

Employers are seeing a significant increase in the number of young workers who lack social skills, interpersonal skills, expected work ethics and professional behavior in the workplace.

- Many commented that many younger workers seem to lack the ability to determine what is appropriate behavior, dress and/or communication in the workplace including interactions with other employees, employer/employee relations, dealing with conflict and appropriate behavior when interacting with customers.
- In the interview process, employers have seen an increase of applicants who are dressed inappropriately, ill-prepared to provide necessary information and engaged in inappropriate activity such as texting, receiving phone calls, etc. during the interview process.
- Some have remarked that they observed a difference in the “perception of work” in many of our youth. This appears to reflect a mindset that a “career” is not necessarily a vital goal and that employment is just a means to allow them to enjoy social and recreational opportunities. This has manifested itself in behavior such as unrealistic expectations for vacations, unrealistic expectations for unscheduled time off, not reporting to work on time, not reporting to work at all and not providing notice when they have decided to leave a position.

AGING OUT OF OUR WORKFORCE IN CERTAIN OCCUPATIONS

Although not unique to our area, the aging out of our workforce appears to be a bit more pronounced in our region. There is a lack of new “blood” entering various industries important to our local economy including the automotive industry, electrical, plumbing and other trades. Requests for certain services in our region are often unmet or delayed due to the lack of appropriately trained young workers entering the workforce in these fields.

LACK OF “HAND WORK” IN EDUCATION

High school graduates appear to have a lack of hands-on experience with physical tasks necessary in many of our regional workforce environments. There is a perception that there is too much “cerebral” training and not enough “hands-on” activities that promote work ethics, connection to the land/environment and assure success in the workplace.

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION AND BELONGING

Employers have reported that new younger employees and applicants appear to lack the sense of “belonging” to a work community or the wider community in general. Many young applicants appear to not understand the importance of establishing and retaining a connection or allegiance to a “work community” and seem to lack the desire or ability to establish and maintain connections within the larger community.

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION CHALLENGES FOR SELF-EMPLOYED/REMOTELY EMPLOYED ADULTS

We have also heard that adults (especially those new to the area) find it difficult to connect with their communities. Even for newly-arrived higher income individuals who operate small businesses from their home or work for remote employers through the use of technology, their perception is often that it is not clear or easy to become integrated members of our villages, towns and regional community. This challenge can manifest itself in the workforce arena as the spouses and children of such individuals are less likely to seek local employment when they do not feel connected to the area. In addition, the family’s potential for long-term residence in our region may be in jeopardy.

YOUTH EXODUS

Many students attend colleges outside of our region and never return. Possible reasons for this are the perceived quality of higher education available locally, the cost of such education and/or the desire to live in other parts of our country or the world. Once they have graduated from college, even for those who desire to return, the lack of well-paying job opportunities in our region that tie to their specific training can be a significant deterrent. In addition, there appears to be great pressure on our “best and brightest” youth from parents, educators and others in our community to leave the area to achieve career and personal success.

POSSIBLE GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR DISCONNECTS REGARDING ALTERNATE CAREER PATHS

There appears to be a perception that guidance counsellors have a distinct preference for guiding youth primarily along the 4-year college path with the possible exception of youth with poor academic performance in high school. Guidance counsellors should be aware that there are multiple pathways to success and that even an academically successful high school student may sometimes be better served in a career path that does not necessarily include a classic 4-year college. Students who are uncertain as to what they believe their career path is should also be made aware of the potential student debt they could incur for a choice that may not be something they will ultimately wish to pursue. Interim career paths with hands-on local employment are also valid pathways (e.g. students working as LNAs as they decide if/when to pursue a nursing or medical career that requires more education.) Such interim pathways can also result in the employer covering some or all of the associated educational costs.

TEACHING TO STANDARDIZED TESTS

Educators often feel their hands are tied with being more flexible or creative in their teaching approaches as the evaluation of their success and Federal guidelines often dictate what their focus must be. It is believed that the success of both the educators and the students are often evaluated primarily on the results of these standardized tests although (at least in New Hampshire) some headway has been made as to how often and in which grades these standardized tests must be implemented.

FAMILY SIZES CONTINUE TO DECLINE

As is true throughout the nation, the size of families is in continual decline with many adults choosing not to have children, delaying having children and having fewer children than has been the case in the past. This has a profound effect on our workforce and the number of new workers entering the workforce. This fact coupled with the “youth exodus” issue listed elsewhere in this document presents a great challenge.

POPULATION DECLINE

Throughout our region, the populations in our resident towns continue to decline which has a profound effect on our workforce and schools. Although our population continues to decline, there is a perception that our labor systems, processes and infrastructure continue to remain very much the same and are doing little to address this growing challenge. Some feel that we need to really reconsider how we fund education and express grave concerns that our classes sizes continue to remain too small and our associated costs much too high. Others express concerns that school consolidation efforts have a resounding negative impact on the identity of our towns and villages which is so important to the attractiveness and success our region

LACK OF DIVERSITY OF JOBS/INDUSTRIES IN OUR REGION

Although we do have ample job opportunities in our area, there appears to be a lack of well-paying opportunities in many fields which contributes to youth exodus as well as a challenge to attracting and retaining new residents and their extended families. Most notably there is a lack of STEM opportunities in our region (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.)

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

“ETHICS” TRAINING WITHIN OUR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

There was a general sense that appropriate work behavior skills, interpersonal relationship skills, business etiquette within and a general sense of “empathy” when working with the public needs to be addressed and integrated into appropriate classes offered by our educational institutions. Such topics should be approached at least by 7th or 8th grade, if not earlier. There has been some resistance in the past to teaching any form of “ethics” in our public institutions so what these classes or class components should be called needs to be carefully considered. Ultimately, it is felt that this education should come from parents but as this does not appear to be happening in many cases, integration into existing curriculum is needed. River Bend Career & Technical Center did indicate that such concepts are already integrated into their classes but how prolific this is throughout other area education institutions is not clear.

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS

Since parents would be an extremely helpful resource for helping youth to identify what is appropriate behavior in the workplace (or in society in general), there may also be opportunities for providing training to parents on how to communicate key concepts to their children. This option would need to be carefully considered and creative titles used to attract parents and not scare them off.

“ETHICS” TRAINING PROVIDED BY EMPLOYERS

In the absence of appropriate training delivered by parents or our educational institutions, training could also be provided by employers perhaps partially funded by public funds or other grants. Potentially, a specific position could be identified which deals with these specific issues. Especially with small employers, this role could perhaps be shared by multiple employers to minimize cost and help assure that newly hired or potential employees have the social and interpersonal skills necessary to thrive in the workplace.

SUCCESS STORIES/SUCCESS VIDEOS/EMPLOYER VIDEOS

Videos could be created that illustrate local success stories in various regional companies. Videos could highlight specific individuals or show more generally how various roles function in area companies and industries within our region. These videos should include a diversity of career paths including ones that do not require a college degree showing that personal and economic success is not always tied to a college degree. These videos could be integrated into current educational efforts offered by our area schools and/or distributed in other way such as community forms, social media, etc. to draw attention from both youth and parents to the needs and diversity of our local economy as well as the job opportunities in our region.

MORE EXPOSURE FOR STUDENTS TO AREA EMPLOYERS

There should be more opportunities for students to be exposed to area employers and businesses and understand what they do and how they function. This could be accomplished via field trips, employer visits, mentoring, hands-on activities in the classroom, remote classes, video connections between schools and businesses, etc.

MORE FLEXIBILITY WITHIN TECHNICAL CENTERS AND FOR TECHNICAL CENTERS

Many issues contribute to the ability to increase the number of students that are pursuing vocational or technical careers at River Bend and other technical centers. We have seen an increase in the interest and cooperation among various factions in utilizing the resources at these institutions. Both Technical Centers and their sending high schools must continue to identify and work towards mutually beneficial relationships that provide all available pathways to student career success, for the success of our area employers and hence to improve and retain thriving communities within our region.

MORE DIVERSE ATTENDANCE AT LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD AND SELECTBOARD MEETINGS

There is a perception that attendance at and participation in local School Board and Selectboard meetings can be fruitless and non-productive but history has shown that within our communities, continual and vocal participation in such meetings can be a huge instigator of change. Area employers as well as associated organizations (like the Chamber of Commerce) should be vocal and frequent participants in these meetings to assure that their needs and concerns are being met.

LOCAL BUSINESS INPUT INTO CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

If there is a desire to assure that the business needs of our local employers are being addressed and met, involving them in some of the curriculum design efforts could prove extremely beneficial for our schools, employers and local economies. This would assure that deficits identified by businesses in young applicants could be integrated into existing classes, where appropriate, without needing to create a special class that addresses these needs.

COOPERATIVE EMPLOYMENT WEB SITE FOR AREA EMPLOYERS

A shared WEB site which assists the spouses, partners and families of new employees looking to locate to the region can be a huge asset in helping us to retain talent by assisting new employees and their families in finding employment. In addition, such a resource provides area employers to a key resource for finding qualified and readily available talent. Efforts including the Upper Valley Dual Career Network, International Dual Career Network and similar resources have proven very beneficial to employers, employees and prospects.

CITIZENS ACADEMY

The creation of a Citizens Academy which serves to educate both adults and children about civic opportunities, organizations, schools, resources and employers in our area can help bridge the gap between those who feel disconnected from the larger community. Such an effort could help open up adult and youth's eyes to various employment opportunities in the area and further solidify the connection with community which will help us retain our existing workforce, welcome new residents, attract new residents and celebrate our region.