



Workforce Forward



GREATER SYLACAUGA AREA

WORKFORCE COMMUNITY FORUM

2021

On April 29, 2021, The Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce and the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enrichment hosted the Greater Sylacauga Area Workforce Community Forum. This report is a summary of community workforce issues, concerns, and opportunities. The Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce and the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enrichment commit to Workforce Forward, an action initiative to enhance and promote a skilled force in our community.

www.sylacaugachamber.com/workforceforward

The Workforce Development Community Forum

On April 29, 2021, the Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce and the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement (SAFE) hosted the first Workforce Development Community Forum at the B.B. Comer Memorial Library. The forum was a dialogue on important workforce issues impacting the Greater Sylacauga Region and its purpose was to foster awareness of the significance of healthy workforce development in Central Alabama. The targeted audience was workplace development providers and commercial and industrial organizations. Josh Laney, Director of the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship, moderated the forum dialogue.

As a matter of introduction, Laura Strickland, Director of the Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce, and Margaret Morton, Director of the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement, introduced the Workforce Forward initiative that will be home to efforts of sustaining awareness and promoting action for developing a healthy and vibrant workforce in the Greater Sylacauga Region.

Prior to the forum, many participants responded to the survey which contributed to the content of the community dialogue. We appreciate those who gave valuable feedback.

Key Survey Results

Of the respondents to the survey, 36% were a small business employer, 18% were an industry employer, 12% were an interested community member, 9% were an educator, and 24% listed others such as career services, employment representative, and statewide partner.

73% of respondents expect to hire new employees within the next year. Over half of the respondents say their new employees need additional skills training to be ready to work.

Over 70% of respondents believe workforce generational shifts will be most disruptive for their business, followed by changes in core technologies.

Some businesses and industries have modified their talent development and/or strategies by offering more competitive pay rates, computer access, virtual remote training, encouraging higher education, posting jobs outside of the region to attract proper talent, and online job applications.

Many respondents are somewhat-to-extremely concerned about the lack of key skills (employability skills, soft skills, digital skills) as a threat to their business.

When asked if their organization is currently engaged in any public-private partnerships regarding workforce training or skills development with local universities, community/state colleges, technical centers/colleges, or local workforce training organizations, 51% said yes, they are engaged and 42% said no they are not engaged. Of those that said yes, they are engaged with the local hospital, local high schools and community college, Ready to Work, career centers, seeking interns for various departments, Alabama Technology Network, partnering with SAFE, Co-Ops, and scholarship programs.

60% of respondents provide work-based learning opportunities at their company.

Only 33% of respondents anticipate the need to provide its current employees with reskilling/upskilling to meet emerging workforce needs. 24% do not, 24% are unsure, and 18% did not apply.

52% of respondents are currently investing in digital (online/virtual) training. 48% of those do not provide tuition reimbursement for reskilling workers, 21% do provide, 3% were unsure.

In response to “what role has the pandemic played in your talent development and/or hiring strategies,” respondents answered:

- “We’ve had to consider ‘work from home’ options.”
- “Our workforce is decreasing due to the federal unemployment bonus payouts.”
- “It has made it harder to find job candidates.”
- “We’ve had to adjust how content is delivered.”
- “We have reached out to county and state departments such as DHR for leads on people who need a job.”
- “Business processes have been developed to address these challenges including virtual, hybrid, and face-to-face providing opportunities to revise and re-invent.”

When asked what specific skill sets businesses are looking for in prospective employees, some respondents answered:

- “Construction Knowledge”
- “Land clearing, chainsaws, physical labor, landscape”
- “Good work ethic in general, communication skills, keyboard skills, ability to count cash and balance a drawer.”
- “Critical thinking and ability to work in a distributed and remote environment.”
- “Show up, quit looking at the cell phone, and be on time.”

When asked, “If you were in charge of training the Sylacauga region's future workforce, what would you do to make the region the best place for a talented workforce?” some respondents answered:

- “Create a way for businesses, city and county officials, organizations, schools to work together on agendas and efforts rather than working individually. The outcomes would be magnificent if we could get on one page.”

- “Get kids who are about to graduate high school more interested in trades such as plumbing, electrical, craftsmanship, brick mason(a dying art), etc. Not all kids are meant to be a doctor or lawyer, and that’s ok.”
- “Begin by partnering with families first and elementary schools second to develop ways for young children to be around adult authority figures to witness them hard at work on a consistent basis throughout the year.”
- “Try to impact all of the high school and middle school kids. Give them the tools from the beginning of completing paperwork to on-the-job skills.”
- “Bring in a technical college which would work to get internships to help the next generation come into a job with experience plus educated about their trade.”
- “Affordable housing and childcare so that single parents or secondary income-earners

The Forum Dialogue

The forum provided a platform for participants to share their organizations workforce dynamics including challenges, needs, and victories. Josh Laney provided momentum throughout the audience with his thought leadership and was the catalyst that moved the dialogue to significant heights.

The audience was divided into three segments: *Providers*, representing educators and trainers, *Consumers*, representing employers, and *Connectors*, representing community partners. The common themes extracted from these three groups were overarching and now serves as the umbrella for the way ahead.

Common Overarching Themes

- Need for collaboration across commerce, industry, trainers, educators and community.
- Deal with the consequence of COVID-19 and Socio-economic Recovery.
- Provide enhanced employability skills in education and training programs.
- Overcome the disparities in leading to diminished workforce.
- Acknowledge increasing wages does not necessarily increase the workforce population.

Educator and Trainers (Providers)

- Upscale and upskill skills training and Ready to Work Programs. This would include greater technical competence and confidence, as well as critical thinking skills.
- Establish avenues to connect employers, trainees and trainers. This includes internships, apprenticeships and job shadowing.
- Increase scope for generational training (age, life situation). This embodies the thinking of “meeting people where they are”.
- Establish intentional training programs by emphasizing purpose and progress.
- Deal with the consequence of COVID-19 and Socio-economic Recovery.
- Encourage and emphasize understanding of the “benefit cliff.”

Employers (Consumers)

- Provide training with greater emphasis on employability skills, work ethic, dependability and accountability.
- Provide creative and adaptive programs to account for socio-economic factors, generational shift and disability.
- Manage and adjust expectations management for interviewing and hiring.
- Create programs for remote, distributed or off-site learning.
- Encourage and provide a knowledgeable and educated workforce.
- Investigate enabling incentives for the workforce to provide things like transportation and childcare.

Employers (Consumers) (continued)

- Find avenues or new policies to deal with the challenges to include the impact of unemployment insurance policies, diminishing skilled workforce, overworking current skilled workforce.
- Resolve the imbalance of wage increase and diminishing workforce.
- Establish Career Center presence in the Sylacauga area.
- Deal with the consequence of COVID-19 and Socio-economic Recovery.

Community Partners (Connectors)

- Collaboration across the workforce development ecosystem.
- Identify Opportunities.
- Provide employability skills to connect the right person to the right job.
- Create new programs and fresh avenues for the worker and the employer.
- Employers provide or encourage things to overcome obstacles to employment, as well as job skills training (transportation, childcare).
- Create workforce incentives.
- Create early career technical training awareness.
- Deal with the consequence of COVID-19 and Socio-economic Recovery.

Workforce Forward: The Way Ahead

The forum has provided the fuel to create change. A representative(s) from the *Consumer*, *Provider*, and *Connector* groups, along with the Sylacauga Chamber of Commerce and SAFE, will form the Workforce Forward Task Force. This group will determine targeted action items for ascertaining the desired measurable goals. The results of the Workforce Forum Survey clearly point to four common overarching themes that will be placed in the Workforce Forward algorithm; employability skills, job skill growth, COVID-19 pandemic recovery, and diminishing workforce. The Task Force will work diligently over a twelve-month period to produce outcomes that will not only propel businesses and people, but that will lend way to igniting the future of our region, state, and country's economic prosperity.