

REPORT
To
STRATEGIC PLANNING TEAM

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS
Of Business



CENTRAL REGION

Conducted on:
January 8, 2021

Conducted by and Report Prepared by
Strumpf Associates: Center for Strategic Change
Washington, DC
Report Date: January 8, 2021



INTRODUCTION

On January 8, 2021, Strumpf Associates moderated two (2) focus groups. Each consisted of business in the region. The focus groups were conducted as part of a comprehensive strategic planning process that the Workforce Development Board (WDB) began in November 2020. The agency has a Strategic Planning Team made up of staff, board members, and community partners charged with developing a strategic action plan meant to position the organization to thrive. Part of the process is to conduct an environmental analysis. Data for the environmental analysis includes feedback from customers on their experience with the organization. The Workforce Development Board and their Strategic Planning Team is committed to listening to the voice of partners, jobseekers, and businesses to capture customer's expectations and preferences.

Focus groups are a qualitative research methodology used to collect information. The method allows for more in-depth reporting by participants than a paper and pencil survey. Focus groups are not designed to reach a consensus among the participants. They are designed to collect information from each participant to identify trends.

COMPOSITION AND PROCESS

The WDB Director invited individuals to the focus groups based on criteria provided by Strumpf Associates. An email letter of invitation was sent to each identified participant. **Five (5) individuals** participated between the two business focus groups, representing five companies. Lori Strumpf facilitated the focus groups.

The facilitator explained to all participants that their responses would remain anonymous. Participants were asked to agree not to repeat what others said in the focus group once the focus group was over. Participants were encouraged to be honest and forthright. Each focus group was conducted virtually and lasted between one hour and one and one-half hours.

The facilitator led participants through a formal and sequenced set of questions. The main purpose of the focus group was to identify the strategic workforce challenges their business was likely to face over the next 12 to 18 months.

The facilitator used probes around each question to clarify what each participant was saying. Their opinions provide insights on key areas that might be addressed strategically by the organization. This summary includes items that had general agreement (not necessarily a consensus) within the focus group. Throughout this report direct participant quotes are represented in *italics*.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The participating businesses represented manufacturing, financial services, tourism, and health care from large, medium, and small business. During introductions, the facilitator asked each participant to identify what services they had received from the workforce system and how they heard about the services. Only one participant reported having received any direct services, including internships and job postings.

This participant stated, *I was unaware of Career Works*. The facilitator asked how they ultimately heard about it. The participant reported that someone reached out to them to ask if they could set up a time to discuss the services available to a business.

After introductions, the facilitator asked, *‘As a business, what challenges are you facing over the next 12 to 18 months?’* A summary of the responses is below.

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- *New young employees lack life skills. For many it may be their first job and my managers are complaining more about these workers not coming to work on time or not calling in when they are going to be out for the day. We have even talked about needing to start a life skills class. I spend time coaching the managers on how to coach these workers.*
- *One participant was in the position of improving diversity and equity in the company. The participant spoke from this perspective, stating a challenge is diversifying the workplace, particularly at the leadership level. A conversation ensued with both participants in this focus group about creating a more inclusive and diverse workplace. Both companies reported having initiatives in place, including a Diversity and Inclusion Officer position, currently filled in one and being filled in the other, to meet this challenge. As the discussion ensued, both stated that their companies are more diverse at the lower entry levels, however, less diverse at the highest levels. Both reported being focused on growing our own through leadership academies and creating mentoring programs so that individuals can move up within the company.*
- *One participant stated that a challenge they face is bridging the gap between my work on diversity and inclusion with the HR Department and following up on the actions that need to be taken.*
- *Recruitment was an issue for several from both focus groups. Statements from participants represent this issue:*
 - *People get offered a job and then do not show up on the first day. I am not sure why, could be because of the stimulus money.*
 - *People we want to hire then do not pass background check or drug screen.*
 - *As example, I have a sales position open now. We did not have a lot applicants, which surprised me. I used what we use for other positions, Indeed. I screened 15 and found 6 that were OK. I was going to interview 3 today and, in the end, only 1 is going to show up. The facilitator asked if the participant had contacted Career Works to post the job. They said they had.*
 - *We are expanding and we will need 30 people by 1st quarter of next year. We need people with pharmaceutical experience. I do think it will be difficult to find those people – especially locally.*
- *As the recruitment conversation continued in one focus group, one participant stated, it is very difficult for us to find trained skilled labor, specifically pipe welders. We have to train up from the inside. That takes time, 1 to 3 years to skill up. And then we train people and after a year or so, a larger company takes them away, offering better wages and better benefits. We are a small company and cannot match what they are offering.*

- *The schools need to focus more on fast-track training for trades. Right now, it is a two-year program to get a welding degree. And they really do not, in my opinion, focus on welding. They focus on making sure the students get a good grade. The amount of time students spend in the welding lab, actually doing this work is much less than the time they spend in the classroom focused on academics. And when they graduate, they cannot do the job we expect them to do.*
- *Retention of the workforce was an issue for two participants in one of the focus groups. As one stated, the area is not attractive to young professionals as there is not a lot to do here so it is difficult to attract people here and keep them here.*
- *As the discussion on retention ensued, one of the participants stated, in our company we know that between the 5th and 9th year minority women leave, primarily because they have advanced as far as they can. Another participant stated, we joke that we often eat our young. Our tenured professionals are not as supportive of the new generation of employees as they could be. I tell the managers that they have to provide affirmation, not tell the employee how to do their job – they know how, but rather they have to tell them that they did a good job. This generation has been getting positive feedback since they were 3. They need to hear what a good job they are doing and need managers to invest time with them and teach them new things.*
- *We did the Bridges Out of Poverty training for some of our leaders. It was very powerful, and I think we should do it for all of them here. For instance, when COVID hit and we were asking some employees to work from home, some of our leadership were surprised that there were employees who did not have internet access. It really just shocked them.*
- *One participant representing a not-for-profit in the tourism industry identified several key challenges:*
 - *We have gone from 10K visitors to less than 3K; we had to cancel a major community event and fundraiser in July. We hope to do it this July.*
 - *Another challenge is that we use volunteers, many of whom are retired. During the pandemic many will not come here as they are in high-risk categories.*
 - *Museums and places like ours are often seen as boring and/or for white people. We are trying to diversify who comes here with the acquisition of the burial ground of those who were enslaved. This pandemic has given us time to do research so we can tell an accurate and full story.*
 - *Broadband access was a key challenge for us. We had to buy our own and it is not accessible everywhere on the property. We have built up our ability to conduct virtual tours but sometimes it just goes out while we are doing the tour. And not all people in this rural area have broadband access.*
 - *We do see people coming back, but the closest accommodations are 30-to-45-minute drive away which is limiting.*
- *The one participant who had worked with Career Works stated that having internships had been a good resource for them. This participant also explained that they could have accessed where Career Works would have subsidized a portion of wages while we trained someone. However, our entry level wage does not meet the requirements. If we took in a person and paid them at the welder 1 level, we could do it. But the person is not yet a*

welder 1 and paying them at that wage just to get the subsidy would not be a good thing as others would not be making that wage. But it is good to know this service is also available. [Facilitators note: the participant was describing an OJT however they did not call it that].

- *Before COVID we went to the schools to just talk about the trades in general. Whether students came to work for us, or for someone else, we just wanted to present that there are good jobs that do not require a college degree. Since COVID we have not been able to do this, and I hope we get connected again when schools open. In the meantime, the virtual job fairs do not provide an opportunity to do this, have a general discussion about the trades. Maybe they could create a virtual informational session and break into break out rooms so we could talk to interested students not just about our company, but about the skilled trades and education requirements.*
- In both focus groups the facilitator asked, *what are the hardest jobs to fill currently?*
 - *Manufacturing operations*
 - *Welders*
 - *We have several hundred openings, from entry level to the professional level. Hardest to fill are nurses and Certified Nursing Assistant. For CNAs, the work is hard, and often they can make about the same working at McDonalds or Home Depot without the stress of this work. We try to stay on top of keeping our compensation competitive.*

In each focus group, the facilitator asked if there were any other workforce issues that participants wanted to raise prior to adjourning.

- In one focus group a participant stated, *we need to make sure that businesses understand that diversity, inclusion, and equity need to be infused throughout the company as part of the company's culture.* The facilitator asked if this should also apply to employability training programs, asking, *should we be having discussions and teaching people – as an employability skill- how to be more inclusive and work in an inclusive environment.* Both participants answered yes.
- In the other focus group, one of the participants stated, *it would be great if there was some leadership training that a company could send individuals who have leadership potential and aspirations to. It could be designed as a long-term training, maybe a year, and the company would also have to be involved by providing mentors.* Another participant in this focus group agreed that this type of offering with this approach could be helpful.
- Another participant responded by saying *we probably need more training opportunities in this area, like HVAC and other trades closer to where we are.*
- *There needs to be more information out there about all the assets available to help businesses. Maybe you could team with the Chamber to push information out about Career Works. There needs to be more collaboration to organize information about all the resources, because right now it seems pretty siloed.*

The Strategic Planning Team will use the information provided in this focus group to inform opportunities for improvement as part of the strategic plan.