

A Strong Workforce

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This is the tenth of ten consecutive articles that I will be writing covering the most frequent topics I have discussed in the first half of 2019.

A strong workforce with the skills, want, and ability to adapt is paramount to the success of any business community's economic growth. Much of the work being done in the area of workforce development is aimed at the retention and recruitment of our regional talent and providing opportunities for our incumbent workforce to obtain the sought after skills that are currently, and even more so in the future, needed in an ever changing work environment.

For years there have been conversations and meetings talking about the future of work in the United States. Well, the future is now. The regions that have been best prepared to meet the workforce demands of that future have developed collaborations that have led to the creation of a network that supports the transitioning of skill needs that are required to meet the demands of employers changing expectations. There is a short term, medium term, and long term approach to addressing this issue of workforce development.

For the purposes of context here are the definitions of short, medium, and long term. Short term is matching employers' six to 12 month employee needs with potential employees who are currently in the job market or will be within the next six to 12 months. Medium term focuses on potential employees who will be entering the full time job market within next 13 months to four years. Long term refers to future employees who won't enter the full time job market until four or more years.

We are fortunate in our area to have employers working with organizations that are developing, implementing, and analyzing the collaborative courses of action to meet current and future needs. There are a number of organizations or initiatives that are underway and the following are some examples.

Community Education through Elkhart Community Schools, Ivy Tech, and Goodwill are examples of places where adult learners can go to earn certification that provides skill enhancement to gain employment in high demand and sometimes low supply fields. Horizon Education Alliance currently is working with employers to provide adult apprenticeship opportunities for incumbent workers. The Governor's Work Ethic Certification has been fully deployed with our Elkhart County High Schools in collaboration with area businesses to place a focus on current seniors achieving employability skills. In addition, today, 200 plus Elkhart High School Seniors will be joining the Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce to hear why Elkhart needs them here and what is being done to provide opportunities for them here. This luncheon is also about getting feedback from them on the things they are looking for in the places they are looking to live and work in the future.

Of course we can't forget the entrepreneurial spirit of Elkhart County. That spirit has to be nurtured into action. StartUp Moxie Elkhart County is doing just that by taking high school juniors and seniors from all over the county and bringing them together to develop the entrepreneurial skills and begin building the businesses of tomorrow that ideally will be based right here in Greater Elkhart.

Most of our area school systems have developed career pathways models to allow students in grades 9-12 to explore career opportunities within the business environment in Elkhart County and the surrounding area. The medium term solutions also include Jobs for Americas Graduates run through the Department of Workforce Development and implemented locally by WorkOne. The South Bend Elkhart Regional Partnership, along with local partners, is developing youth apprenticeships that ultimately are aimed at changing the workforce recruitment model for high school students to local businesses.

Preparing our K-8 students for jobs that are changing rapidly or don't even exist yet is a big challenge for our elementary and middle school educators. Schools are working to make sure students have the skills of adaptability and problem solving, along with career exploration. In conjunction with the schools, HEA is spearheading experiences like Manufacturing Days and Career Quest for middle school students. As automation becomes more prevalent, organizations like E3 Robotics and ETHOS Innovation Center are insuring that STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education is supplemented in the classrooms and as extra-curricular opportunities.

The present is bright for our region and with the examples of creativity, innovation, and collaboration that were mentioned above, the future looks even brighter. We encourage you to be a life-long learner and research and get involved with or support any of the institutions or organizations that were mentioned.

Have a positive and productive week and know that your Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce is here to serve and promote you in any way we can.