



Workforce Development in the West Valley

By Ilana Lowery

WESTMARC

Covid has changed nearly every aspect of our lives from business to school to our family time at home. Employees have a need to work closer to home, more remote school options are necessary and family demands have intensified over the past two years.

All of this pandemic disruption can make building and maintaining a strong workforce a challenge.

But in the West Valley — even before the pandemic — leaders have been working toward a regional strategy that brings industry and cities together in an effort to move past what some have called a “workforce crisis.”

Community leaders in the West Valley say a workforce strategy for the region is dependent on one goal: Getting education institutions and industry on the same page.

“In the world of ‘workforce,’ it’s not what it was, and change is required,” said Brian Wright, a career coach with West-MEC, a public school district that provides career training programs for both high school and adult students in Arizona.

“The only way this change, and ultimately succeed, is with an effective strategy,” he said. “Companies and organizations need a workforce plan of action that determines what, how, when and where. Without it they will find themselves spinning their wheels and frustrated because either they cannot get the staff needed or retain what they have.”

Jennifer Stein, interim economic development director for the city of Peoria, said the West Valley has specific and unique workforce strengths and opportunities for companies.

“Labor is identified by companies as being the most important site-selection factor, yet they do not have the resources or ability to always identify where a desired workforce is located. Economic development officials and education partners can identify this workforce and

connect companies and coordinate labor needs. This type of coordination enhances the West Valley's competitive position," she said.

"Workforce development is about allocating resources strategically to educate and provide valuable skill sets to the labor market as a whole in order to prepare an individual for that role or position," Stein added. "It also involves purposefully measuring out future demand and making educated decisions about meeting that demand by working together with partners."

Sintra Hoffman, president and CEO of WESTMARC, said the next steps in a regional workforce plan will be to bring cities, industry and education together to discuss the next five years.

"It's time to re-energize this discussion," Hoffman said at a recent West Valley Pipeline update convening.

The timing is right to bring this issue back to the forefront, partly because of the young talent pool available in the West Valley, but more importantly, because employee retention has never been more important than in the current market, she said.

"WESTMARC just launched the West Valley Emerging Leaders program to identify, highlight and promote up-and-comers for leadership positions locally," Hoffman said, pointing out that the median age in the West Valley is just 34.8 years.

"As industry grows in this region, we need to ensure we're connecting these emerging leaders to these businesses for career growth opportunities and talent retention," Hoffman said.

Paula Livingston, dean of Instruction and Occupational Education at Estrella Mountain Community College, said it will be important for industry to "come to the table to explain the needs they have."

"The key to the success of these strategies is keeping businesses involved and employers providing valuable input concerning their workforce needs. Partners such as Maricopa Association of Governments, which does valuable research and data gathering, are critical to the West Valley staying ahead of trends that have an effect on labor availability and quality," Stein said.

Some West Valley companies, like Campbell's Snacks, which owns Snyder's of Hanover in Goodyear, have been using various tactics to land qualified employees for its production and

distribution facility. The pretzel manufacturer is looking for 60 workers and recently held a job fair, are offering signing bonuses and paying wages of \$18-\$32 an hour.

Despite the workforce challenges, West Valley businesses and educational institutions have proven that by coming together and creating workforce development opportunities, the region is working hard to meet the employee shortages.

Resources such as Career Connect, Elevate Arizona, Pathways to Prosperity, Pipeline AZ and Maricopa@Work, have held several in-person hiring events for West Valley employers looking to fill positions immediately, but more importantly, there has been a strong push to increase job training across all industries from technology to construction to trucking and others, which will support long-term workforce development for the region.

“I look at workforce development like World Peace,” said Mike Hoover, city of Surprise assistant economic development director, referring to having all of the parties at the table discussing workforce development and developing strategy.

Programs such as West-MEC’s career and technical education courses, Grand Canyon University’s computer-aided design and cyber security offerings; Maricopa Community Colleges’ myriad tech certificates and other soft skills-oriented programs, some even starting in elementary school, are boosting the employability of West Valley’s talent pool.

Although there is a plethora of programs to help workers with training and placement, there are a few things that still need to happen, according to Wright, including the expectations of job seekers. But, he adds, the one thing that needs to change — and separates the more successful organizations from others — is the mindset of current employers.

“For the first time we are in a multi-generational workforce. You might have baby boomers, millennials and Gen Z working for the same company. The way boomers and the like think about working, getting a job and feedback is totally different than our new generation,” he said. “Understanding this and changing your mindset about hiring and work itself has to change.”

He said people are no longer just "happy to be working," and they no longer are nervous about not having a job. “Employers have to change their mindset and build an organization that is appealing and makes an impact. Employers should no longer require degrees that have

nothing to do with the actual job, have 10 rounds of interviews or a hiring process that cannot accommodate the person who walks in off the street,” Wright said.

Existing business-educational partnerships have already proven they can help close the skills gap and to that end, part of the region’s workforce development strategy will be to expand on those successes.

In an effort to prepare a workforce for artificial intelligence jobs, Intel Corp. and the Maricopa County Community College District launched a certificate and degree program last fall and plan to expand the program — the first of its kind in the U.S. — as the inaugural class of students prepares for graduation.

The program was made possible through a collaboration with Intel, the Arizona Commerce Authority and Maricopa Community Colleges. The program currently is available at Estrella Mountain and Chandler-Gilbert community colleges, but plans call for offering the program at all of the college district’s schools.

In addition, both Estrella Mountain and Glendale community colleges partner with Microsoft Corp. on the tech giant’s Datacenter Academy to augment existing IT curriculum to add instruction unique to IT support scenarios in a large-scale IT environment, such as a hyper-scale cloud datacenter.

“The primary goal is to increase the employability of the local workforce in the community by ensuring that the curriculum aligns to the core competencies and sought-after skills in the broader IT industry,” according to Microsoft’s website. “While some scenarios and instruction may be specific or unique to a Microsoft datacenter, the curriculum, certifications acquired, and real-world hands-on experience gained through the program will provide benefits to all students seeking a career in IT.”

Ken Chapa, city of Avondale Economic Development and Tourism director, pointed out that the leisure and hospitality sectors were hit the hardest as the pandemic rages on, but Arizona’s employment situation continues to improve, and it is the leisure and hospitality industry leading the job recovery — amounting to more than one out of every three private-sector jobs added in the past year, or an increase of 18.5%, according to the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity.

The West Valley's 24% growth rate compared to Maricopa County's rate of 16% could signal an eventual shift in people and leverage from other, more populous areas of metro Phoenix, experts say.

West Valley leaders are optimistic that the growth will continue bringing new employment opportunities to the region. By 2030, 40 percent of the metro's population growth will occur in the West Valley.

More people make the region more attractive to big-name employers, and more jobs, better freeway access and ample housing, all have played into the region's growth, Hoffman said.

Currently, about 36% of metro Phoenix's health care talent, 32% of its finance and insurance labor, and 34% of manufacturing workers reside in the West Valley.

Two recent new job opportunities in the West Valley include companies such as KOREPlex, a solar panel facility that is expected to bring about 3,000 well-paying jobs to the area, and Factor, a subsidiary of meal-kit company HelloFresh, which just signed a lease in Goodyear for a 300,100-square-foot industrial facility that could bring about 800 new jobs.

Also, KeHE Distributors, one of the largest grocery and natural distributors in North America, unveiled its 16th distribution center in Goodyear last October. The new center supports more than 270 jobs, and Glenn Bard, KeHE's director of operations, said finding employees for the West Valley facility was a positive experience. He said they've hired 260 employees to date.

"We've had several job fairs," Bard said, "[and] the caliber of experienced candidates has been above the norm from my past experience in other states," he said. KeHE has 15 other distribution centers.

Bard said KeHE was able to staff the Goodyear distribution center fairly quickly. "Our talent acquisition specialist is from the West Valley and has had her hands on the pulse of the community," he said. "Overall, Goodyear is growing both in commercial space and residential communities. [We are] very excited to be a part of it."

Individual cities often have their own workforce development programs. The city of Peoria, for example, partners with other organizations to promote and support their programs.

“We have allocated funds to SBDC and other groups that work with employers and employees. We have seen the need for these programs when we are talking to companies that are looking to relocate or expand into Peoria. Workforce quality and availability plays an important role in those conversations,” said Peoria’s Stein.

Having a long-range vision goes hand-in-hand with working together with all agencies, she said.

“Closing the skills gap is a long-term process and needs strong solutions over a period of time. Organizations must commit to this long-term plan and provide the necessary resources to support education and training of our existing and future workforce,” she said.

Wright said closing the skills gap also means recognizing that educational degrees aren’t needed for most jobs.

“Education is crucial and needed, and I fully believe in it but to close the gap we have to see there is another way,” he said. “Recognizing that licensures and certifications are just as important and oftentimes what is really needed ...take a chance on something different than what we have always done and recognize and acknowledge transferable skill sets and how they will not just fill a position but be a great fit.”