

Workforce Development Strategies for the City of Brooklyn Park



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Executive Summary

Some areas of Brooklyn Park are experiencing unemployment rates that exceed the rates in the city and the region as a whole, with estimates of unemployment as high as 19% in some Census tracts. At the same time, the City's Economic Development Department is receiving requests from local businesses to find qualified employees to fill existing job openings. Those who need jobs either are not finding the job openings or do not possess the proper skills to obtain the jobs that are available

This report

- identifies model workforce development programs for youth, new immigrants /ESL residents, communities of color, and low-income communities;
- identifies best practices for programs/strategies to serve these workers and employers;
- describes workforce development programs presently available to serve Brooklyn Park residents;
- reports on funding sources available for workforce development, and how the City can potentially access or leverage these sources to support workforce development;
- presents the results of interviews with local businesses to determine the challenges they are encountering hiring more ethnically and socio-economically diverse employees; and
- reports on the type of support they would like from the City or other organizations and agencies.

Model Programs for Youth

The STEP-UP Program

Successful strategies:

- Opportunity to learn about careers
- Networking with business professionals
- Tutoring to understand what it takes to go to college
- Development of 21st Century Skills

Mentoring Programs

Mentoring helps youth with career engagement and workforce development programs giving them the necessary skills and experience to gain access to career-building jobs.

Successful strategies:

- providing guidance to address professional and personal challenges, as well as
- enhancing career readiness skills.
- building the necessary skills through work experiences
- facilitating continued academic engagement and achievement
- supporting youth in the development of non-cognitive skills necessary for successful employment

Model Programs for Immigrants and Refugees

Work-Focused Language Instruction

Successful strategies:

- Provide contextualized language instruction with formal skills training to help get immigrants into skilled jobs, with livable wages more quickly
- Share the burden of capacity building by encouraging partnerships among employers, unions, and teachers
- Encourage workplace-based instruction; and take into account the needs of nontraditional students (such as part-time students or parents)
- Combine language instruction and vocational training
- Career counseling for immigrants and refugees

Challenges and Barriers:

- Lack of English and computer skills
- Pre-industrial background or limited work experience. Due to different cultural norms in their home countries, some refugees and immigrants struggle to grasp the importance of time clocks, set schedules, accountability, productivity, and teamwork.
- Cultural differences - Employers are potentially resistant to immigrants and refugees because they often hesitate to speak up, show initiative, ask questions, or admit a blunder.
- Highly skilled immigrants and refugees sometime have a hard time finding positions that match their skills, education, and or experience.

State and Local Government Programs—Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

The LEP Pathway Program is operated by the state's Office of Refugee & Immigrant Assistance. It provides specialized and culturally appropriate services to limited English proficient learners to help them gain employment.

Successful strategies

- Intensive ELS with life skills curricula and employment focused
- Resettlement and Integration services (healthcare, social services)
- Culturally and linguistically appropriate services (Contractors have close ties to ethnic communities, customized to meet the specific needs of each learner)
- Job search and employment placement
- Community jobs placement via commerce

Barriers to success

- Limited English Proficiency.
- Diverse groups of refugees (cross-cultural issues)
- Immediate need to start working
- Physical and mental health condition

Employer Strategies for Hiring Newcomers

General tips and strategies for working with refugees:

- Offer bridging programs that provide short-term, sector-specific training
- Arrange a mentor or buddy
- Provide orientations in native languages using interpreters
- Arrange a regular (e.g. monthly, quarterly, biannually) culture day, picnic or potluck
- Consider offering English as a Second Language (ESL) in the workplace
- Provide cross cultural and diversity trainings to supervisors and other employees
- Strive to use a “cultural informant” communication style
- Be aware of nonverbal communication, including eye contact, use of time, appearance, posture, facial expressions, laughter, tone of voice, conversational distance, scent, grooming and dress, use of silence, and gestures. It conveys information beyond the words of a message.
- Provide an orientation that is designed to clarify workplace policies and procedures, and that includes cultural information.

Interviews with Brooklyn Park Employers

Interviews were conducted with local business owners and/or human resource representatives to determine the challenges they are encountering with recruiting, hiring, and retention, with a specific focus on information relating to diversity recruiting, onboarding, and training. Results are summarized below.

Challenges with Recruiting, Hiring, and Retention

- Lack of applicants to choose from due to the state's low unemployment rates.
- Retention of entry level hires or highly skilled labor beyond initial training
- Flexibility of candidates being able or willing to work different shifts
- Lack of reliable transportation or poor understanding of the transportation system
- Aptitude to learn and lack of soft-skills
- Finding candidates with the appropriate skill set, education level, and experience
- Many of the necessary skills are not being taught at vocational institutions
- Vocational training institutions have had difficulty maintaining a sufficient applicant pool in higher skilled manufacturing technology
- Some smaller businesses are not able to compete in providing higher wages, employee benefit packages and continuous overtime pay to attract and retain employees
- The small and midsize businesses have limitations with retaining staff due to their more stagnant promotional track opportunities
- To assist with the initial recruiting process some small to midsize businesses are using third party recruiting agencies e.g. staffing agencies, temporary agencies

Approach to Recruiting and Hiring

For larger global organizations

- Did not perceive recruiting as a challenge
- Numerous approaches to hiring, well established pipelines with institutions of higher education, and structured training programs
- Heavy usage of employment page on company website, as well as staff dedicated

- to recruiting and marketing via social media and commercials
- Offer employee sign on bonuses and financial compensation for employee referrals
 - Have enough staff that they are able to post new or open positions for internal staff to apply to before opening up opportunities to external candidates.
 - The ability to post internally first allows these organizations advantages

For smaller businesses

- Posted on job boards such a Indeed, Craigslist, Monster, Brooklink...
- Relied on word of mouth
- Were unable to offer financial incentives for employee referrals
- A few of the businesses have been creative with their hiring approaches, and have more part time employees
- Some are recruiting by, attending 2 year colleges job fairs, reach out to DEED, and post on universities employment boards

Training

- The vast majority considered the onus of creating a skilled labor market was their responsibility alone. Resources from outside agencies such as, vocational institutions and local governments were not a luxury they could afford.
- One of the smaller business was in the process of creating an internal training program for workers interested in the field of mechanics. Their intentions are to become a training site for all mechanics of which they would charge competitors for training outside employees
- All organizations that offered more time and labor intensive training believed that the long term benefits outweigh the upfront cost
- Their original training processes were less intensive and personal, which resulted in higher turnover rates
- Organizations with direct care positions tended to have the most extensive training processes in place

- Organizations that had formal training tracks were routinely improving their processes due to technology, industry needs, and desire to continue to grow as an organization

Diversity

- Integrating diverse workers into the workforce was not perceived as a challenge
- Larger companies had more knowledge and experience with diversifying their workforce and expressed the positive value of a diverse workforce
- Specific industries such as manufacturing, education services and healthcare services viewed diversifying as a natural process in their industries
- The large global businesses generally offered training and workshops to employees at all levels on topics related to diversity and inclusion, had recruiters dedicated to hiring talent from diverse sectors
- One larger (non-global) business moved their branch to its current location, because of the diverse, high unemployment applicant pool
- Some companies noted challenge with gender diversity particularly in the STEM and manufacturing fields
- A large number of the smaller to midsize businesses with less resources struggled to see the value with opportunities such as receiving advice about integrating immigrant groups into their workplace or workshop session held by experts involved in workforce training of youth and immigrants
- The approaches to hiring for many of the businesses are barriers to some Brooklyn Park residents. Businesses post open positions to online job boards and social media platforms. For residents that English is a foreign language to, these are not platforms they are likely to utilize.
- Ten out of the thirteen companies were unaware of the high pockets of unemployment in the circumambient area or the level of diversity of the surrounding workforce.

Available State Resources

Minnesota PIPELINE Project (MN PIPELINE Project)

Aims to:

- develop and enhance Minnesota's skilled workforce,
- engage employers, educators, and labor representatives, and
- expand dual-training and registered apprenticeship in Minnesota.

The PIPELINE Project is managed by the Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) in collaboration with the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE).

Job Skills Partnership

Minnesota Employment and Economic Development (DEED) provides training grants of up to \$400,000 to educational institutions that partner with businesses to develop new job training or retraining for existing employees.

Youth Career Connection Project (YCC)

Funded by the United Way, this project connects youth employment-based training programs at education organizations and institutions with those of employers to expand and deepen the next generation of workers in advanced manufacturing and information technology.

Businesses with Successful Programs

EJ Ajax

EJ Ajax and Sons is a manufacturer of progressive metal stampings and sheet metal fabrication. EJ Ajax invested 5.5% of their payroll into professional development, training, and workforce education. They initiated the M-Powered program to offer fast-track manufacturing training using Hennepin Technical College. Displaced workers with low-income are identified by a local nonprofit job development organization and participate in the program.

Wyoming Machine

Wyoming provides services such as design evaluation, tolerance and manufacturability check, and prototype manufacturing. They received the National Association of Workforce Board's business leadership award for excellence in educating community members to fill their jobs. They built partnerships with local technical schools and colleges and secured governmental grants to fund specialized equipment and customized training.

Flexo Tech

Flexo Tech is a non-profit cooperation initiated by AWT Labels & Packaging and Computype, a manufacturing company. The goal of Flexo Tech is to train employees for the industry and produce sustainable growth for Flexography.

Design Ready Controls

Design produces electrical control panels for equipment manufacturers in oil, water, gas, and alternative energy markets offers their employees opportunities to acquire new skills for their current position and for other jobs within the company

Overall Recommendations

1. Businesses need to either accept and plan for turnover due to the limitations of the organizations,
2. Businesses need to better communicate the benefits of the business while being upfront with employees about opportunities for promotion.
3. Instead of a company overview with each job posting, this organization advertises the benefits of working for them that would be specific to the individual positions. Their philosophy is that “onboarding is very expensive, an easy [way] to avoid turnover is to have the right hire fill the right job.”
4. Small businesses within the same industry need to pool resources and form a consortium to provide training that is generic enough that a variety of businesses can recruit from the candidate pool. A model program to review is Flex-O-Tech.
5. Human resources (HR) and supervisors need to provide mentoring and coaching for new hires. These strategies that are not only effective, but can be relatively low cost to provide.
6. HR and business owners can also take the lead in providing the social and language learning opportunities. Small businesses can pool resources with the help of Adult Education providers which in the US can develop customized language and vocational training to potential and new hires.
7. HR and business owners can create inclusive job descriptions and target recruiting in diverse neighborhoods with higher unemployment rates than the national average. For small businesses without HR departments having 2 different people review the job description can prove to offer more inclusivity.

Recommendations for Brooklyn Park Economic Development Department

1. Make all local businesses aware of the demographics of the city and the need for diversity recruiting, hiring and training to bridge current and future employment gaps.
2. Establish stronger connections with all business owners and HR departments and start with organizations that have model programs.
3. Communicate resources the city is able to provide and steps they will need to do to make improvements to recruiting, hiring, training, and employee retention.
4. Offer multiple sources of information to business owners and staff, this could be done through in person workshops, webinars, and written communication such as a regular electronic newsletter. For easy access and sustainability webinars and workshops can be recorded and posted on the city's website.
5. There are companies that have been trailblazers in working with organizations to attract employees from these groups. We have identified at least three companies locally that have been successful in hiring and training youth and immigrant groups. These could be a resource for this community. The best models focus on staying employed rather than just enrollment.
6. Offer opportunities for businesses and residence to connect through a city wide job fair in a location that is easily accessible for residents in high unemployment locations. Have interpreters on site, local higher education institutions that can provide hiring information to employers, and admissions information to residence.
7. Organize small business networks to collaborate on pre-employment and language skill.