

TARGETING TALENT

Business Leaders Developing Assessment, Assistance Tools

By **Crickett Gibbons**

Business leaders have spoken: Attracting, developing and retaining talent are among today's greatest workplace challenges. An employer-led Indiana Chamber Foundation initiative will soon provide some needed assistance.

The Business Champions for Talent Development program will identify "best in class" talent engagement practices that can be replicated by businesses statewide. Employer-developed indicators will be used to help assess talent development practices against the most comprehensive and strategic methods of building robust talent pipelines. These indicators will be tied to shared learning opportunities and technical assistance for organizations in need of improvement.

A Business Champions Advisory Network (BCAN) comprised of experienced senior-level talent development professionals and business executives from around the state is identifying employer engagement best practices. The spectrum includes K-12 education, postsecondary education and the adult workforce. Diverse industries, company sizes and sectors are represented on the advisory group.

BCAN chair Sheri Alexander notes, "There's a continuum of techniques that takes a company from foundational activities all the way through to where it's a strategic part of a business plan." Alexander is president of employee benefits for Gregory & Appel Insurance in Indianapolis.

The initiative will include a self-assessment tool for employers of all sizes to use to identify strengths and challenges in their workforce development pipeline. It will be supplemented by resources to help address specific areas of concern. The initiative is funded by a grant from JPMorgan Chase.

Committee member Marilyn Moran-Townsend, CEO of CVC Communications in Fort Wayne, stresses that "from this identification, this self-assessment, businesses are going to be better able to laser focus their efforts to improve based on what they determine, as opposed to just thinking about workforce challenges as being so large and overwhelming."

Moran-Townsend is a past chair of the Indiana Chamber board of directors and the Chamber Foundation, as well as the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.

"The intent is to make it easy for companies to use the tool to assess the depth of their engagement, which is why we have HR professionals and business executives leading the effort," comments Shelley Huffman, Indiana Chamber Foundation director of college and career readiness. "It's really designed to be a learning opportunity for employers and their supply chain to strengthen talent pipelines and focus on strategic areas where technical assistance may be needed."

The Chamber Foundation and BCAN are

partnering with FutureWorks and PPI (national firms focused on regional economic and talent development) to create the self-assessment tool. A pilot assessment should be ready this summer. It will be tested to ensure it is appropriate for companies of all sizes in diverse industries before it is rolled out statewide, according to Huffman.

The Business Champions program, Huffman explains, is in response to the increasing number of Indiana employers that indicate on the Indiana Chamber's annual workforce survey that their greatest challenge is finding qualified talent. It also builds on previous work by the Chamber and Foundation, which conducted a series of



The Business Champions Advisory Network is developing a self-assessment tool to help employers identify strengths and challenges in their workforce development pipeline.



Sheri Alexander (right), chair of the employer-led initiative, participates in a breakout session with Lauren Mynsberge and Tim Nussbaum.

postsecondary pathways events around the state to advance business-education partnerships in talent development.

Committee member Dan Peterson, vice president of industry and governmental affairs at Cook Group Inc. in Bloomington, supports the idea that employers play an important role in workforce development, including reaching out early to engage with education and training providers.

“Too often we find, especially in the K-12 world, students and their families don’t really understand all of the opportunities that exist in their own backyard. We need to be as aggressive as possible and as clear as possible to make sure people understand what opportunities are available and what their pathways are to take advantage of those opportunities.”

He stresses that sharing experiences – what has worked and what hasn’t – is important. For example, Cook Group rolled out a program to help current employees further their education and training. The company pays tuition up front, provides other resources and has

established partnerships with education institutions such as Ivy Tech and Indiana Wesleyan University.

While leaders of smaller companies may not believe they can do something similar, Peterson emphasizes it isn’t that difficult, that the investment is worthwhile and that Cook is willing – eager even – to talk to others about the process.

This type of sharing and engagement is at the core of the Business Champions program, to help all Indiana employers address their biggest talent development challenges.

“We want Indiana’s workforce to be the best that there is,” Alexander sums up. “We want to be a destination of choice for business, for families, and I think this type of conversation is indicative of that. If we can help employers be better in building talent development pipelines, it will be better for all of us, our kids and our grandkids.”

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