



OVER ESTIMATING SKILLS AND EDUCATION

by

Workforce Development Immersion Team 2021

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Introduction

"Workforce Development." It is a phrase used to describe several efforts related to preparing workers for gainful employment. But what exactly does it entail? As our team began to discuss workforce development, we quickly realized how broad and nuanced the topic is and the many paths our project could take. As such, we determined the focus of our immersion experience should be to understand workforce development and how it presents itself within the Greater Richmond Region.

Scope

We decided to begin our experience by conducting individual interviews with various professionals who currently work in the workforce development field. We created a framework of questions to guide these interviews and intentionally kept the questions open-ended to foster candid responses. Questions included:

- How do you define workforce development?
- What does it mean to your organization?
- What do you see as the biggest workforce development challenges in our region?
- What is your wish list for solving these challenges?

Following the interviews, we discussed the gaps identified and determined that we were interested in learning more about the region-wide resources and opportunities to close these gaps. We compiled a list of potential problem statements derived from the interviews, and each team member voted for the idea that resonated with them the most. This process allowed us to land on the following hypothesis:

There is a perceived gap in the talent supply due to employers overestimating the skills and education required for their positions.

To test our hypothesis, we decided to invite a group of professionals to a virtual focus group to garner feedback through collaborative conversation. As a result, 12 attendees from across the region represented large employers, government and non-profit agencies, economic development, small businesses, and consulting groups.

Findings

During the focus group, our hypothesis was confirmed by roughly 92% of the participants. In addition, we gained insights that broadened our understanding even more. Some of the key learnings include:

- There are regional task forces dedicated to workforce development.
- Employers sometimes impose education requirements to ensure a certain level of writing, critical thinking, and soft skills rather than for the position's needs.
- Many employers offer pay levels misaligned with the positions they advertise.
- Smaller businesses experience difficulty with affording the expertise they need.
- The cost of living is rising faster than wages in RVA.
- Generational characteristics affect work preferences (e.g., less interest in overtime; more interest in work-life balance).

Recommendations / Calls to Action

Our team's main objective was to create an opportunity for professionals in the workforce development space to collaborate. We feel the focus group roundtable was a good start at accomplishing this. We recommend continued collaborative sessions on a regular cadence. Additional recommendations are as follows:

Educators

- Engage in conversations with workforce development professionals to understand the needs of employers and build curricula that support this.
- Focus on soft skills early on, as this is an area employers identify as needing the most improvement.

Applicants

- Continue to apply for jobs even if you do not meet all qualifications.
- Seek out professional development, training, and resources, and apply for federally-funded professional development programs.

Employers

- Re-evaluate, refresh, and "right-size" job descriptions to align with job duties.
- Adjust the work environment and salaries to meet the needs of today.

Regional Municipalities

- Support and engage in regional collaborations and bring awareness of opportunities.
- Look to other similarly-sized cities to find best practices.

Summary

The scope of workforce development can range from preparing high schoolers to enter the workforce to equipping adults with the skills needed to enhance their careers, having a local workforce that meets the region's needs, and more. Many organizations and groups in the Greater Richmond Region must continue to collaborate and coordinate efforts to enhance our workforce. When done efficiently, these efforts will allow us to reach the ultimate goal of workforce development—regional economic stability and prosperity.

Interviews

- Mac Beaton, Director, Henrico Career and Technical Education Resource Center
- Dan Humphrey, Co-Founder and Director, Communities at Work
- Natalie Meredith, Assistant Vice President-Workforce Development, Community College Workforce Alliance
- Tyonka Rimawi, Program Officer, Community Partnerships, Robins Foundation