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Categories:
[Publications](#)

Q&A: What Tennessee Manufacturers Want to Know

During our September lunch gathering, attendees had the opportunity to ask questions of three Tennesseans directly involved with workforce development: House Speaker Beth Harwell; Jamie Miller of Proper Polymers, whose lighting group operates a manufacturing facility in Pulaski; and Tim Waldo of the UT Center for Industrial Services. Here's what was on the minds of those in the audience:

Q: (For Speaker Harwell): Is there a long-range transportation plan to support the ability of workers to get to work?

A: Roughly half of Tennessee's 19,000 bridges are at least 50 years old, the Speaker noted. During its most recent session, the Legislature approved new infrastructure funding; however, said Harwell, in the long run the gasoline tax alone will provide insufficient revenue to support the state's infrastructure needs, especially as the number of alternative-fuel vehicles grows. As a result, Tennessee's leaders will need to find a new source of dedicated funding. "When you buy a car," Harwell said, "about 80 percent of the tax now goes into the general fund. I would put that into infrastructure."

Q: (For Tim Waldo): Can you assess the nonprofits in the workforce development (WfD) space in Tennessee?

A: In his presentation, Waldo had noted that a large number of nonprofits (no one seems to sure how many there are) offer WfD-related services. These services involve a variety of types of training (both hard and soft skills) and groups ranging from disconnected youth to senior adults. "You'd be surprised at what's out there," Waldo said, noting that about two-thirds of the nonprofit providers are faith-based organizations. Unfortunately, he suggested, many manufacturers simply aren't aware of these resources (one reason why finding a partner that knows the landscape can be so valuable).

Q: (For Speaker Harwell): How do we get in front of the drug problem, rather than simply responding to it?

A: While there are no simple fixes, the Speaker said one positive step would be for schools to re-emphasize “character education” — instilling an ethic of showing up on time and working hard. “Too many people think they don’t have to earn a living, that there’s some kind of entitlement.”

Q: (For Tim Waldo): What are the best strategies for workforce retention?

A: The answer, Waldo said, will be different for each company. Sometimes, the underlying cause of high turnover involves wages and salaries, but in other cases the challenge is completely different. The important first step, Waldo said, is to avoid making assumptions about why employees leave. “People typically leave managers and bosses rather than companies,” he explained. “Study your culture and system; don’t assume you know the answer.”

Q: (For Jamie Miller) Describe your experiences with recruiting younger workers.

A: Miller noted that Proper Polymer’s co-op and apprenticeship programs are designed to build a pipeline of young workers with skills the company needs. The programs have been a success. At the same time, Miller noted, “our turnover has been from the younger generation.”

“Fall in love with millennials,” said Waldo, because we need them. “Find what will make them come to work for you.”

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