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Top of Mind for Manufacturers

During our November lunch gathering, attendees had the opportunity to ask questions of three authorities on key issues in workforce development: Joey Hatch, Executive Vice President with Skanska USA Building, Inc.; Peggy Shukairy, immigration attorney with Frost Brown Todd; and Brian McCuller, Partner-in-Charge for State and Local Tax Services with LBMC. Here's what was on the minds of those in the audience:

(For all three presenters): If you could magically pull a lever, what would your top workforce priority be? What should we advocate for most?

All three presenters offered different perspectives based on their expertise. For Joey Hatch, a top priority involved placing more emphasis on student success, especially in technical and community colleges that are heavily focused on workforce development. "We have high enrollment in our tech and community colleges," Hatch explained, "but the graduation rates are not good. For community colleges they're just in the mid-20s, and that's even when you allow six years for students to complete their degrees." To improve graduation rates, Hatch suggested, administrators and policymakers need to address factors outside the classroom that play a key role in whether students succeed. "A lot of them need help with transportation, life help and career counseling," he said.

At the top of Peggy Shukairy's wish list was a focus on increasing legal immigration as a means to reduce the number of people who come here illegally. "We have shortages in a lot of industries, involving jobs that no one else wants to do, such as meat processing," Shukairy said. "We also want to be able to bring more of the best and the brightest here, to companies where they can have a big impact. We need to focus on increasing the legal pathways for people to be in this country."

Brian McCuller would like to change how Tennessee deals with how tax-related disputes, such as audits, are resolved. Currently, he pointed out, appeals go to the tax commissioner's office, creating "a perception that the deck is stacked." Other states, McCuller said,

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are moving to independent tax tribunals that operate outside the Department of Revenue. He cited Georgia's system as a good model to emulate. "I don't understand why this has been so difficult [in Tennessee]," McCuller said.

(For Brian McCuller): A client in a neighboring state had success with workforce tax credits there. How does this play out in Tennessee?

"Tennessee," McCuller said, "is trying to be more competitive, but we still have a ways to go. I hope to see us moving more in the right direction. He noted that tax reform is like turning the *Titanic* – very slow. "But," he added, "because we are competing with a lot of other states around us, we have the impetus to do this."

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