

Bourbon County, Kansas

Workforce Assessment

Executive Summary and Observations & Recommendations



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Executive Summary

Bourbon County, KS is located at the east edge of the state, adjoining Missouri and approximately halfway between Kansas City, KS and the Oklahoma state line.

In the 2020 census, Bourbon County had a population of 14,360 people. Its largest city and county seat, Fort Scott, had a census population of 7,552. Both Ft. Scott and Bourbon County have seen a population loss over the past decade but are projected to see modest growth in the next five years.

Employment has also dropped in the past five years from about 7,000 to around 6,500. Like the population, it is also expected to increase over the next five years.

Overall Employment:

The top five business sectors in Bourbon County in terms of employment are: Manufacturing, Government (which includes public education), Health Care and Social Assistance, Retail Trade and Accommodation and Food Services. The first three have a stronger presence than in the overall U.S. employment. They also supply more than half of all jobs in the county.

The largest occupation sectors in the county are Office and Administrative Support, Production, Sales and Related, Educational Instruction and Library Services, and Transportation and Material Moving. These five occupation sectors collectively have more than 3,300 jobs.

Employment and unemployment vary from month to month. On average, employment in the county was about 6,500 (Emsi/Lightcast Q2, 2022). There are approximately 6,400 county residents in the labor force of which just over 200 were unemployed in early 2022: a 3.4% unemployment rate.

Bourbon County is adjacent to eight other counties. Highways 69 (four-lane) and 54 make commuting relatively easy, reflected in the number of residents in and outside of the county who commute. According to U.S. Census numbers for 2021, 2,700 residents commute outside of the county for work. There are 2,300 people who commute into Bourbon County for employment.

The largest commuting areas, according to US Census 2021 numbers, are Crawford County, KS and Vernon County, MO. The inbound and outbound numbers with Crawford County are similar. Bourbon County receives significantly more inbound commuters from Vernon County than it sends. Significant populations in both counties are within a 30 minutes' drive time. The Census data is reflected in the employer survey, where respondents noted those two counties as the top areas from which they draw.

Despite the significant commuting numbers, employers indicate they have a largely localized workforce. Those responding to the survey noted about 60% of the workforce comes from within the county and an additional 30% comes from an adjoining county. In total about 90% of employees come from within an approximately 30 minutes commute time. Employees responding to that survey were even more localized, with a sizable number (80%) reporting travel of less than 20 minutes. Overall, 90% of employees reported a commute time of 30 minutes or less.

Concerns About the Region: Employers are particularly focused on workforce quality and workforce availability with 74% and 71% of employers respectively noting these as their top concerns about the region. Nearly 40% of employers expressed concerns about housing availability and about 25% of employers noted the quality of K-12 education. The need for better broadband service we pointed out by more than 16% of respondents while 14% expressed concern over the training option.

Employee Skills:

Despite concerns over quality and quantity of workforce, employers give high marks to the overall skills of their existing workforce. On a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being best, the existing workforce gets a 3.9. Basic skills are ranked the highest with Education/Training suited to the specific job rated lowest, but still above average. However, employers show concerns about their newest hires. This group received a 3, or “average” rating in terms of overall skills.

From the employee side, 90% of survey respondents said they are Satisfied (54%) or Very Satisfied (36%) with their job. This is a strong statement by employees, especially considering the survey was taken during the national wave of resignations post-pandemic. Although a significant percentage of employees are satisfied with their jobs, twenty-seven percent (27%) believe they are underemployed. In addition, 21% of those employed full-time in Bourbon County indicated they are actively seeking new employment. Seven percent (7%) of those employed Part-time said they were looking for a new job and 8% of Independent Contractors said they would consider a new job.

Hiring:

Employers noted that finding applicants with a “willingness to work” was the top obstacle in hiring. Anecdotally, that comment is heard across the region and numerous national articles have been written about the “Great Resignation”. More specifically, employers also noted the Small Labor Pool as a critical obstacle to finding good applicants. Although eight other counties adjoin Bourbon County, most of them are rural as well and have respectively strong employment, consequently the regional labor market is also tight.

When asked about specific skills they look for in applicants, Willingness to Work was again the top mention. Employers also noted a Positive Attitude, Good Communications skills, and Ability to Learn and Use New Information. Job Specific Skills rounded out the top five.

Employers also noted they look for a Good Prior Work record for people already in the workforce.

In terms of communicating job openings, nearly 75% of employers indicated that word of mouth, typically considered incumbent employee communications, was the most successful. More than half also indicated Facebook was a top means of obtaining applicants, followed by Indeed at just over one-quarter of respondents.

Ft. Scott Community College is the top post-secondary institution from which employers recruit talent, with nearly 70% of employers saying they use the college. This is followed by nearly 60% indicating using Pittsburg State University. Similar numbers of students planning for post-secondary education indicate these two institutions as their top choices. A top pick for specific skills training for students, and for employers seeking the skills, is the Nevada Welding School.

Training:

Employers believe providing training is important. On a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being Very Important, employers give training a 3.8. The top areas they consider important for which to provide training are Personal Communications and Job Specific Skills training at about 60% each. These are followed by Critical Thinking and Teamwork skills.

Employees’ perception of the importance of training by their employers is somewhat less. Asked if they believe their employers consider training to Enhance Current Skill and improve skills for Advancement, employees gave average marks, 3.1 and 2.7 respectively, to the important they believe their employers place on training. For employees, gaining Job Specific Skills is the top consideration, followed by Leadership skills. Computer/IT and People Management skills came next followed by Personal Communication in fifth.

In terms of training delivery, companies by far (95%) utilize in-house training with existing staff. About 20% to 25% of employers use In-house training with Vendors, Off-site training with Vendors, and Off-site training with Subject Matter Experts respectively. The use of community colleges, universities and trade schools for training existing employees is small. In all forms (in-house, on-line, off-site) the use of post-secondary institutions comprised only 14% of respondents.

Apprenticeships and internships are currently used by 26% of responding employers. When asked the question if they would consider utilizing such programs, 74% of respondents said that they would. More than 60% expressed interest in apprenticeship / internship programs with a community college while just over half said they would consider programs with high school.

Among the high school students, 40% indicated they would like to participate in such programs. An additional 30% said they had an interest and would like to have more information.

Drivers for Attracting & Retaining Employees:

As noted above, 21% of those employed full-time indicated they are seeking new employment. An additional 27% (removing those actively seeking) consider themselves Underemployed. For those who live and work in the county, Better Pay is a top driver for seeking a new job, with 74% of those actively seeking and 88% of those underemployed. Obtaining Better Benefits was second, but decidedly less strong with 42% of those actively seeking and 52% of those underemployed noting this is a driver. Third for both was Better Work/Life Balance. For those actively seeking, Work/Life Balance was tied with Better Benefits at 42%. For those underemployed it was 40%.

For commuters, the opportunity to Reduce Commuting Time was the top driver for those actively seeking a new job at 56%. Better Pay was tied for second with Work/Life Balance and Remote Work options at 33%. Better Benefits were only noted by 11% of respondents. However, Better Pay was still the top driver for those commuters who consider themselves underemployed, at 78%. Better Benefits was also second at 70% but it was tied with Work/Life Balance.

Among those currently Not Working but who would consider coming back into the workforce, three pools of population were noted. These are: Retired, Disabled and Homemakers. For those Retired and Disabled, a paycheck was the top driver at 33% and 67% respectively. Neither group had interest in benefits. For homemakers, the biggest driver was the opportunity to do Remote Work, at 38% and Benefits at 25%. Pay was a top consideration for 12%.

- **Labor Rates:**

In interviews, all of the employers noted they had raised wages to attract maintain and attract talent. The pressure on wages as a result of a tight labor market as the economy rebounded from the pandemic has been noted in most business sectors at every level from local to national. Bourbon County companies were not immune to that trend.

While Bourbon County employers indicated raising wages, employers in other counties were as well. Along with the surrounding eight counties, statistical data was also collected on Johnson County, KS and Joplin, MO MSA, both of which attract workers from Bourbon County. Across all sectors, Bourbon County wages are about 2.5% lower than the average of the eight surrounding counties, lower than the Joplin MSA by approximately 6% and more than 20% lower than Johnson County. NOTE: Management sector wages in Johnson County are significantly higher than in the others, which is reflected in the average.

In several key areas of the Bourbon County economy, wages are lower than the average of the eight surrounding counties by just over 2% to 5%. These areas are Healthcare Support; Installation, Maintenance, and Repair; Production; and Transportation and Material Moving.

Bourbon County REDI selected several top occupations to determine the impact of wages on labor availability. These occupations are: Registered Nurse, Healthcare Support, Printing Press Operator, Electric and Electronic Engineering Technicians and General Operations Managers. Wages in Bourbon County, the eight surrounding counties, Johnson County and Joplin MSA, were averaged on these six occupations. Collectively that average was 7.5% higher than Bourbon County. Utilizing EMSI/Lightcast comparisons, increasing wages in these six occupations by 7.5% resulted in an increase in workforce availability by 7% to 50% depending on the job.

Those employed were asked “how much farther would they commute” for a step-up in pay. This was regardless of their current commute. On average, each 5% step in pay increment (EG: 5%-10% pay increase) added an additional 5 to 10 minutes in commute time. As noted above, while 80% of respondents currently commute 20 minutes or less, essentially within Bourbon County, a commute time of 30 minutes reaches substantially more population in surrounding counties.

- **Benefits:** Top benefits offered by companies included Vacation/Paid Time Off, Health Insurance for Employees and Families, and some form of Retirement Plan. However, nearly 26% of responding firms noted have no benefits at all.

Employed residents and commuting full-time workers noted Health Insurance for themselves and family, Retirement plans and Paid Time Off as the top three benefits they currently receive. For part-time workers, Vacation and paid Sick Leave were the top benefits reported. About 40% noted receiving Health Insurance and Retirement. These respondents generally have benefits, with only 7% of full-time and 18% of part-time workers saying that had no benefits.

For the future workforce, students indicated they had the greatest interest in Health Insurance and Vacation/Personal Time Off. These were followed by Flextime and Retirement. 30% of students noted they see on-going training as a benefit.

- **Flexible Time:**
For actively seeking a new job and those who consider themselves underemployed, Work/Life Balance is the number three consideration in seeking and accepting a new job after pay and typical benefits such as health insurance. Employers were asked how often the issue of flexible time came up in discussion with incumbent workers as well as applicants for jobs. On a 1 to 3 scale, with one as “never” and 3 as “often”, employers indicated just over a 2 for existing workers and just under a 2 for applicants.

Students responding to the question of their preferred benefits on obtaining a job, like the current workforce, noted flexible time as a third choice.

Generation Shift of the Workforce:

Nationally, the demographics see the last of the Baby Boomer generation retiring over the next seven years. Baby Boomers are the largest generation. Generation Z, those 10 to 24, is the second largest generation and many of them are already in the workforce. However, this group is still not as large as Boomers and many rural communities are seeing a declining and aging population. This is not the case in Bourbon County.

Bourbon County has a slightly larger Gen Z population than Boomers. Consequently, there are about 200 more Gen Z people who could be entering the workforce than Boomers leaving over the next eight years. The eight surrounding counties also have slightly larger Gen Z groups, which will add to the potential workforce in the commuting area. However, this is not sufficient to even replace the potential number of retirees. Currently some 1,500 people in the workforce are aged 55 or over.

Impact of Automation:

The current tight labor market and long-term demographic trends are leading more employers to look at automation and other technologies. When asked the question if automation could have a negative or positive impact on their operations, 75% a “some” to “significant” positive impact. About 20% said it was a neutral impact. Despite the current or anticipated positive impact of automation, less than half of responding companies say they are supplying specific training in this area.

While users of cell phones, games and computers, students are not sure of the impact automation can have on their future job opportunities. Overall, 27% of students thought there would be fewer jobs, while 22% thought there would be more. Half of the students were unsure. Males are more likely than females to believe there will be more job opportunities. Females tended to show more uncertainty. Younger students, both male and female, believed automation would result in fewer job options for them, than did the older students.

When asked if they believed they should take additional classes in computers, IT, and automation; young males were strongest with a 40% “yes” rate. However, the younger females only had an 18% “yes” response, lower than their older peers. More than 40% of students overall were “unsure”.

Occupation Clusters:

Based on good wages, local economic impact and growth in jobs over national average, Bourbon County has six key cluster areas: Production Technology / Heavy Machinery; Printing Services; Automotive; Transportation & Logistics; Paper & Packaging and Agricultural Inputs & Services. There are nine specific NAICS sectors within these clusters: four in manufacturing, two in transportation and two in agriculture.

Looking at the top ten jobs in each of the nine NAICS (90 jobs), there are 48 unique occupation titles; and nine which crosscut three or more of the sectors.

An assessment of occupation growth (EMSI/Lightcast data) to 2032 by both numbers and percent indicates nearly forty occupations, which include the nine cluster jobs. The top twenty of these jobs, by 2032 projected numbers, will employ nearly 2,000 people. They include jobs in manufacturing, health care, education and transportation; similar to the top employment sectors in 2022.

Attracting Talent and Remote Work:

Ninety-five percent (95%) of employers responding to the survey showed an interest in a talent attraction program if one was created. Of these, nearly 56% indicated their need was for semi-skilled workers. About 30% noted skilled workers as a target; similar to those who are seeking unskilled workers. Nearly 28% wanted to target professional talent.

In 2020, the top inbound migration came to Bourbon County from Crawford, Johnson and Vernon counties. The same three counties were the top out-bound migration locations, with Vernon and Johnson counties 2nd and 3rd respectively. More regionally, Bourbon County had inbound migration from areas around Topeka, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, and central Kansas.

In 2020, eight percent (8%) of Bourbon County's workforce identified as "remote" workers. Compared to the eight surrounding counties, Bourbon County had both the third highest percentage of employment and third highest number (522) of people working remotely. Both of the higher counties were in Missouri.

Labor Availability:

From the residents and employees survey, 21% of those with full-time jobs are actively seeking a new position. Among commuting residents, 25% are actively seeking a new job. Among part-time workers, 7% indicated they are actively seeking a new position. Extending that response to the overall workforce, there are more than 1,600 full-time workers and 100 part-time workers and independent contractors who were actively seeking new employment at the time of this study.

From the survey, 26% of full-time workers in the county indicated they are underemployed. For part-time workers and independent contractors, the response was 33% and 38% respectively. Among those commuting outside of the county, 25% of full-time workers believe they are underemployed. About 22% of full-time workers, both in county and commuting, indicated they are Actively Seeking a new job. Of those who are not actively seeking employment, approximately 80% said they would consider a new job. Overall, there are more than 1,200 full-time workers and 360 part-time workers and independent contractors who would consider new employment.

Adding underutilized potential pools of employees such as those disabled, homemakers and retirees who would return to the workforce along with students joining the workforce to the above, there are more than 1,400 potential full-time workers and nearly 1,500 potential part-time workers available.

Observations and Recommendations:

Bourbon County currently has a strong workforce that receives high marks for its skills from employers. Like many rural communities, however, the county has a limited workforce pool. With surrounding counties also generally rural in nature and having good economies, there is limited opportunity to obtain a net gain in workforce from those areas as evidenced from the commuting patterns.

Unlike many rural areas, Bourbon County is not facing a declining and aging population. The Gen Z population (10 to 24) is slightly larger than the Boomers who have retired or will be retiring over the next eight years. That is a good starting point, but strong efforts need to be made to retain as much of this incoming generation of workers in the county as possible and attract new people to the county both to fill key jobs and to help support and grow existing retail and service firms while creating new entrepreneurship opportunities. While talent attraction is important, opportunities will be constrained without a focus on housing. The lack of attainable housing will also impact retention of incoming workforce.

To attract and retain the workforce, the county will also need to put emphasis on community amenities. These amenities should be considered with a view to enhancing quality of living for current residents and the upcoming generation. Efforts that benefit current residents and families will be attractive to newcomers as well. These include quality housing, strong K-12 education and post-secondary options including a thriving community college, accessible broadband service, well-maintained parks with recreation and health options, hike/bike trails that connect within communities and across the county, and specific focused efforts to encourage community engagement.

The above are noted because having, maintaining, and growing a strong workforce starts with having a place where people want to live first and then find occupations that fit their talents, skills, and interests second. That said, the following observations and recommendations are focused on maintaining and further developing the strong workforce already present in Bourbon County. These recommendations are a starting point for action.

Supporting Existing Firms:

Observation: Companies in the county need greater access to data to assist them in hiring. Several of the largest firms already have the capacity to develop information on the local market. They are also “employers of choice” and as such can pull applicants. Smaller firms have limited access to overall regional data and very limited access to labor market data in competing communities as they consider how to retain and attract workers.

Recommendations:

- Utilize this report as a base for providing the broader business community and, where appropriate, specific firms with annual data to indicate the strongest employment sectors, numbers of people employed, wages both within the county and in the surrounding 8-county Region, to illustrate the size of workforce and the competition for workforce from surrounding counties.

- Related to above, utilize EMSI/Lightcast or similar service to provide the broader business community information on wages, number of current workers and potential workforce (by job / sector) in comparison to surrounding counties and competing areas. Customized data for individual firms can also be developed from the same data sources as needed. NOTE: Kansas Works and Department of Labor as well as the US Bureau of Labor Statistics are also good resources.
- To go deeper, consider establishing a detailed wage and benefit survey on a bi-annual basis to get more specific information across key sectors and sizes of firms. Share the results of survey back to participants to assist them in evaluating their own wages and benefits.
- Establish a formal Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) call program with county and/or city level partners such as the chamber of commerce, city government, community college. Utilize Synchronist or similar system that standardizes reporting to help identify both individual and collective trends in companies and allows for tracking of assistance.

Observation: In one-on-one interviews several companies noted that “no one knows what we do.” Bourbon County is not alone in an overall lack of public awareness, as well as future workforce awareness, of the types of companies that are located there, what they do and the jobs they have available. Increasing public awareness and, in particular, upcoming workforce awareness, of companies and jobs, helps increase interest in working in the area and retaining the county workforce. A number of respondent companies have jobs requiring advanced skills. Broader knowledge of the availability of such jobs may help residents and future workers (students) understand there are higher-level opportunities in Bourbon County.

Three of the largest and overall better-paying employment sectors are Manufacturing, Government (including public education) and Health Care & Social Services. In current clusters, Transportation and Agriculture are also strong. These would be good sectors to begin promoting in the county to add focus to and interest in occupations in these areas. Additionally, the top growth occupations noted in this report should be utilized to encourage specific consideration of these key jobs.

Recommendations:

- Develop a profile series, print and audio/visual, on companies with partners such as the chamber of commerce and local media. Ft. Scott Community College is also a resource for media production. This series can utilize broad data from this report and then a profile of a firm. (EG: Manufacturing sector provides more than 1,400 jobs in the county and is one of the top paying sectors. Among our firms is Labconco...brief profile.) In the profile include brief range of jobs and wages.
- Consider a second-level profile series on the key growth occupations noted in this report. occupations, this would be a job title (preferably one of the top growth jobs), how many jobs there are in the region, number of companies (with examples) that have those jobs and pay ranges. Also include education needed to obtain jobs.
- Add a WORKFORCE section to the REDI website, with the above company and occupation profiles with text, pics, and links to videos. Note that YouTube can be utilized so expand access to videos. Link this section of website to partners such as school districts, FSCC, chamber of commerce, KansasWorks etc.

- Work with schools to find impactful ways to promote print and video profiles to students.
- Utilize REDI and partner (city, county, chamber FSCC) Facebook pages to release company and occupation profiles on a regular basis. Additional impact can be gained through the “paid ad” approach.

Observation: Employers note the top five most important skills an applicant can bring are: 1) Willingness / commitment to work, 2) Positive attitude, 3) Communication skills, 4) Ability to learn and use new information and 5) Service orientation. These are primarily soft skills attributes that can be developed. Note that Specific Job Skills was sixth followed by Critical-thinking Skills.

It cannot be stressed enough that basic education skills (reading, clear writing, math) and soft skills (work ethic, attitude, interpersonal actions) are the key foundation for the workforce in any occupation and sector. While direct jobs skills training is important, providing these basic skills is absolutely critical for individuals to be successful and companies to maintain and grow in the county.

Recommendations:

- Work with companies and training organizations to identify programs and curricula to help train existing workforce on communication, problem-solving and learning and using new information. While some larger firms indicate they do such training, medium and smaller firms do not have the numbers or capacity to offer training. Creating, finding, and promoting resources to smaller firms will benefit their operations.
- Additionally, encourage employers to utilize ACTs WK Talent and WK Fit to help identify cognitive diversity as well as personality traits related to soft skills. In addition, ACT WorkReady testing will help to identify gaps in Graphic Literacy, Math, and Reading Workplace Documents. Identification of such gaps in both soft and basic skills can help provide specific remediation direction for currently employed individuals.
- Students exhibited a close correlation with Employers on understanding the top skills needed as an applicant and successful employee. The ACT testing noted above can help identify basic and soft skills gaps for additional attention through high school. Additional programming at the high school level, and even in middle school, should be developed to focus on soft skills such as attendance, timely assignment completion, response to direction / supervision and interpersonal communication. There are a number of training modules available to help in these areas. One other mechanism to consider at the high school level is the use of an Employability Report Card, which helps validate the above skills, while reinforcing their need. Working with Employers ask students for their employability report card reinforces the importance of these soft skills.
- Work with Fort Scott Community College and Pittsburg State University, the two largest institutions from which employers hire, to make resources available to provide training in the above top five skills areas for existing employees, non-traditional and returning potential workforce and students.

Observation: There are several long-term trends that were accelerated by the pandemic. Several of these may be categorized under the heading of work-life balance and include employee benefits such as greater flextime and remote work. Work-life balance was noted by those actively seeking employment as well as many who would consider coming back into the work. Students noted benefits relating to work-life balance as important in their consideration for employment following graduation from high school, technical school, or college. A number of jobs do not lend themselves to flextime or remote work, for example manufacturing and restaurant food preparation. However, many manufacturers have created more “home” time by moving to four-day work weeks. Trends indicate that the desire for greater flexibility in work time, including remote work, is not going away. Employers need to find ways to address this to retain and attract quality employees.

Recommendations:

- Utilize this document to educate the broad business community about the accelerated trends in flextime and remote work. Disseminate through partners such as the chamber of commerce. Work with employers and training institutions to identify resources to help companies, where possible, adapt flextime and/or remote work options. Also consider workshops and presentations that can be made in person and on-line. Consider utilizing employers that have had success in the above for testimonials.
- In addition to flextime and remote work, there are several other benefits noted in a recent U.S. Chamber of Commerce report. This report came out after the survey work with county employers and is not included in the benefits section of this assessment. However, these additional benefits should be considered by area employers. Resources to help companies understand and use these benefits, including child and elder care, homebuying assistance, and mental wellness should be developed.

Observation: The demographics of the county have minimal diversity except for gender. Several companies surveyed indicated they are working on diversity and inclusion despite the demographics and indicate they feel they have made progress with gender and age diversity. However, several firms noted that even when they recruit employees from outside that could bring racial and ethnic diversity to their specific company, it is difficult to keep those employees. In one-on-one interviews, some employers noted that inclusion of new people from outside of the region is an issue, regardless of race and/or ethnicity. Inclusion is an issue regardless of community size, although perhaps more prevalent in rural areas. People develop their own circles and those may exist for decades. While often friendly and welcoming, companies and communities need to take extra steps to include and engage newcomers.

- Develop resources to assist companies, particularly smaller firms, with creating hiring and operating policies that includes diversity and inclusion. While the demographics may not have much diversity, by adopting policies that recognize such, companies show they are open to a diverse workforce.
- Provide workshops on diversity and inclusion, including workplace behavior, for company leadership and workforce to help encourage hiring diversity and operational inclusion.

- Develop information and programs that help companies with cognitive diversity. While racial and ethnic diversity may be limited by county and regional demographics, cognitive diversity presents challenges and opportunities for companies. Life experiences, education and economic status create views and opinions that may cause conflict within an organization or, conversely, that can be levered to develop create workplace momentum. ACTs WK Talent and WK Fit can help identify cognitive diversity as well as personality traits. A number of companies have adopted assessments like [Enneagram](#) or [Ntrinsx](#) to gain a better understanding of employees and how to use individual strengths and weaknesses in developing a strong and productive workforce
- Strongly consider developing or working with other entities to develop a “community concierge” program. This program would likely be started in larger companies recruiting new people from outside the region. This type of program is designed at the community level, with support from the chamber of commerce, employers, realtors, not-for-profit and social service organizations, schools, churches, and anyone else that offers information and ways to create engagement. Basically, it entails a questionnaire for the new employee and spouse to note what they like to do: what types of volunteering, recreation activities, church attendance, etc. Also note what their children like to be engaged in such as youth sports, learning opportunities. The goal is to then match them up to community members and organizations with one-on-one meetings, dinners, etc. to create engagement.

Observation: There is a non-traditional workforce available to existing companies with homemakers and retirees interested in full and part-time employment. There is also a large working age (18-64) group of disabled, many of whom will consider working. In addition, many communities have undertaken efforts to help companies employ people who have criminal records. As noted in the survey responses, part-time and flextime work as well as work from home options are attractive to these groups.

Recommendations:

- Work with existing employers who have pursued non-traditional workers, Kansas Works, and educational/training organizations to identify successful methods of outreach to the non-traditional workforce. Also consider HR organizations, such as SHRM, as resources for how to reach out and engage non-traditional workers. Compile into a “how-to” guide that can be used by employers of all sizes and sectors.
- Seek out similar sized communities that have had success with non-traditional workforce and, in particular, their companies that have had success. Utilize as testimonial and guidance to help county employers begin their own efforts.
- Develop workshops, presentations, and on-line resources for employers. (See “how-to” above)
- Consider development of an internal media campaign (traditional and social) to reach out to non-traditional workers, inform them jobs are available, guide them to specific companies that are hiring or to Career Center or other services that can assist them in getting engaged.
- Enhance adult learning opportunities to reach non-traditional and poverty adults who may need skills to return to the workforce or upskill to better jobs. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a resource that may be helpful.

- Utilize ACT WorkReady testing to help validate basic skills of non-traditional workers to help them re-engage with workforce.

Connecting Students to Work:

Observation: Students, whether planning to go to work immediately after high school, after trade school, or after college, noted an array of careers they wanted to pursue. Health Care and Social Services, Manufacturing and Construction all offer jobs ranging from unskilled to highly skilled. Health Care and Social Services, which currently employ about 900 people in the region, get a strong look from college bound students (35%) and technical school/community college bound (24%).

However, Manufacturing is the largest sector in the county with 1,400 employees but does not receive as much attention. Less than 5% of those going to a four-year college and only 17% of students headed for community college/technical school express an interest in manufacturing. This disconnect should be a major concern to employers, educators, and the broad community. Additional emphasis needs to be added to many of the recommendations to connect students to manufacturing opportunities. This is particularly important in providing knowledge of the companies and key occupations.

Recommendations:

- Internships and Apprenticeships offer good opportunities to link students to work. Twenty-six percent (26%) of responding companies are currently doing apprenticeships and/or internships, but 74% say they would offer such programs. Approximately 3% of current students are or have participated in internships or apprenticeships, but more than 75% indicate they would participate or are at least interested in learning more. Develop information on internships and apprenticeships for companies.
- Fort Scott Community College can play a strong role in developing apprenticeship programs linking high school students and employers. Engage FSCC to assess interest in working on such development; connect to other community colleges that have had success.
- Develop information for students on the opportunities that internships and apprenticeships offer for their advancement and potential job on graduation. Work with school districts to convey that information.
- Work with school districts to get profile information on companies and specific jobs (as noted above) in classrooms by eighth grade.
- Connect companies to classrooms with speakers, company tours (where possible).
- Work with school districts to make sure profile videos and collateral, speakers, tours are cross connected in county. (EG: Students in Ft. Scott know about opportunities in Uniontown, etc.)

Actively build basic and specific skills for the future workforce:

Observation: While the county's employers need a workforce today, the long-term success of the businesses depends on developing a strong workforce for the future. Programs like internships and

apprenticeships help connect students to the workplace and help them gain workplace skills. However, there will still be limitations on the numbers of students who may participate. Efforts need to be made to ensure students today have a broad set of basic skills to be able to get the jobs of tomorrow.

Employers noted the top five skills they need from applicants as 1) Willingness to work, 2) Positive attitude, 3) Good Communication skills, 4) Problem-solving skills and 5) Ability to Learn and use new information. While the first two are more personality traits, they can still be conveyed as important to obtaining and retaining a good job. The next three are skills that can be assessed and enhanced through focused efforts in school. As noted above, key basic education and soft skills are absolutely critical for all employees and the foundation on which to build enhanced and job specific skills.

Fort Scott Community College is a valuable resource but has opportunities to provide more support to employers today and in the future. Key economic/job sectors in Healthcare and Social Services, Education, Agriculture and Construction are currently supported by education and training at FSCC. However, there is limited curricula supporting Manufacturing, the largest current and future employment sector, and Transportation. It should be noted that to enhance current programs and create new ones, it needs a “pipeline” of students coming in from high schools as well as adult learners and companies who will hire FSCC students and utilize FSCC training for existing workers.

Recommendations:

- Utilize ACT WorkReady pre-testing (Key Train) in 8th or early 9th grade to assess skills in Graphic Literacy, Reading and Understanding Documents, and Applied Math. Use ACT curricula guidance to help instructors work with students to fill the gaps in those skills. The Key Train and WorkReady testing may be used with skills profiles for jobs students may be considering.
- Also consider ACT WK Talent and WK Fit. In brief, Talent is an emotional and attitudes levels assessment that helps define soft skills including learning, working in teams, etc. Fit examines occupational compatibility based on the job seeker’s/student’s interests. These will help instructors work on soft skills with the students as well as help guide students toward jobs where they have a social/emotional personality fit as well as a fit on basic skills.
- Work with school districts to test students at early 12th grade (or late 11th) for ACT WorkReady certification. Compare to jobs they are considering. Remediate as needed. Retest.
- Develop a program at 7th or 8th grade to give students “real life” view of job earnings and living costs. Engages employers, realtors, education, car dealers, insurance agents, etc. Students talk to employers about jobs in which they are interested, understand education needed for job and pay. They then talk with others about living costs, monthly/annual basis and compare. (EG: Reality Store, is a good example with resources found on-line)
- Develop and implement an Employability Report Card in the schools. This grades students on attendance, timeliness, completion of assignments and other items the schools may define with input on what is important to employers. Engage employers in supporting such a program and requesting the ERC.
- Work with FSCC and employers to develop stronger Manufacturing and Transportation curricula. Connect students in high schools to these programs.

- Develop collaboration with FSCC, high schools and employers to expand apprenticeships and internships. Along with these, look for opportunities where FSCC can coordinate and provide customized training for companies.

Observation: In the county, almost one in five children (19%) aged seventeen and under live at or below the Federal Poverty Level. Nearly sixty percent of all students qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch program. Poverty poses a significant issue for students' ability to learn.

Recommendations:

- Consider implementing a collaboration of education, private businesses, government, faith-based organizations, social services and volunteers the helps supply basic needs (food, clothing) to children and assistance for families so children can go to the classroom ready to learn. Bright Futures, which is in more than eighty school districts across the country, is a good model for such an effort.
- Assist children by assisting their families. Adults in poverty may not be working or working full-time, due to lack of education/training and/or family circumstance. Develop a program to reach out to those adults and assess their current skills (use ACT Key Train); utilize ACT curricula to help remediate as well as linking to training. Also define other obstacles to employment and work on addressing.
- Concurrent to assisting students and parents who want to work, develop programs to help change lifestyles to move families out of poverty. Suggest Bridges Out of Poverty or Circles. Note that Mexico, MO is also using Bridges effectively.

The Impact of Automation and AI:

Observation: The pandemic accelerated long-running trends to automation in the workplace. An overall lack of labor as the economy rebounded has increased the use of automation in most business sectors. In the county, nearly 82% of responding companies indicate that automation will have some level of positive impact on their operations. The reminder believes automation will have both negative and positive impact. In the county, automation will be increasingly used by companies to offset lack of labor force, particularly at lesser-skilled, lower paying jobs. As noted in this study, a significant number of jobs, almost all lower skilled, are at risk in the future.

Of concern is the number of students who are uncertain about the impact of automation and other technology. While Gen Z is considered to be very comfortable with technology in general, it appears there is a gap in understanding what that means for their careers. Also note that in the student responses, 15% indicated going right to work after high school while 8% are uncertain of what direction they want to pursue. Many of these students will go to lower-skilled jobs that are at risk of automation in the coming years.

Recommendations:

- Develop, with partners including Fort Scott Community College and Pittsburg State University informational resources to help smaller firms better understand and adopt new technology overall, and automation where applicable. This is critical to help them offset a continued lack of labor.

- Work with employers, media, chamber of commerce and other community partners (such as social services) to develop outreach to the current lower-skilled workforce as well as those who may want to return to the workforce by messaging on the need to learn and/or upgrade their skills. Work with area education partners, K-16, and other partners to provide such skill training.
- As part of the student-oriented program noted above, provide information on how companies are using and/or plan to use automation. Stress learning basic technology skills.
- Provide educators and students with information noting the impact of automation on lower-skilled and entry-level jobs to encourage gaining more technology skills in high school as well as providing encouragement for post-secondary education.

Attracting Remote Workers:

Observation: Although there were major shifts in population movements created by the pandemic driven opportunity to work remotely, it has not developed into a wholesale move to smaller cities and rural areas in the center of the country as anticipated. The latest data indicates that more than 95% of the moves from the heart of major coastal cities went to suburbs with proximity to those cities. However, the county already has 8% of its workforce working remotely and the lower cost of living, presence of outdoor recreation and lakefront housing, and relatively strong amenities provide a foundation. Proximity to the Kansas City metropolitan area, specifically Johnson County, and smaller metro of Joplin support a pilot effort to attract workers.

Recommendations:

- Create a focused effort to attract new residents, utilizing targeted social media supported by a specific website extolling the region's attractiveness and opportunities. Utilize testimonials from people who have moved from "big" cities. Target the Johnson County and the Joplin metro area as well as Springfield and Topeka (second round). Focus on those that may be able to work remotely but need to be "at the office" several times a month; easy commute.
- Keep above site general enough, while noting "remote work," to be useful to existing companies in referring prospective employees from outside the region for more information.
- Utilize realtors to determine where people are moving from beside the metro areas noted above, and pilot social media campaigns in those areas to gauge response.
- Develop collateral materials for distribution through restaurants, motels and companies utilizing contract workers to promote the region as place for full-time living.

Recruiting Talent:

Observation: The demographics of the county, even with Generation Z coming into the workplace over the next decade, still are not sufficient to meet the needs of employers. With a limited labor market and limited media options, employers rely primarily on word of mouth and social media (Facebook) to let people in the region know of job opportunities. For the higher-skilled jobs, companies utilize jobs boards, like Indeed, and LinkedIn. Companies do hire students from community colleges and universities, with an emphasis on Ft. Scott Community College and Pittsburg State University. They

also expressed interest in supporting a county approach to recruiting talent, especially for semi-skilled and professional workforce.

Recommendations:

- Same website as noted above.
- Work with employers to develop a geo-fenced social media campaign to key geographic areas (as above) where there are skills related to jobs employers are offering. Have a specific “jobs board” and links to others so people can learn more about the jobs. Note: EMSI/Lightcast can be utilized to help pinpoint geographic areas with the skills.
- Work with employers to target technical schools, community colleges and universities that are preferred by regional students. This effort may include career fairs at the schools, messaging in school communication channels, social media. This should be done as a “collective” effort promoting the lifestyle, abundant jobs, opportunities to advance (see student perspectives on why to leave the county).
- Work with the K-12 schools, in-region technical schools and Ft. Scott Community College to create a targeted campaign for students who left the region and did not come back. Focus on those approx. 10-20 years after college (age 32-42). Promote upper-level jobs availability, opportunities to start a business and overall quality of life and education for their children.

Attracting New Employers:

Observation: The county has seen strong activity prior and through the pandemic and on into this year in expansions of companies. As the overall labor market becomes tighter, companies will look for increased validation of workforce availability and skill levels in deciding on placing work with existing firms or finding a new location.

Recommendations:

- From this report, develop a one-pager highlighting availability of workforce. Note wages, education/skills levels, experience (older workforce) and willingness to work. Also give the anecdotal response of current employers on the quality of their workforce related to basic, advanced, soft, and overall skills.
- Develop the above information for website use.
- Create “highlights” or bullets of workforce availability and skills quality, levels of education and training, for use in targeted social media and / or email campaigns to targeted sectors.
- Capitalize on the education skills gap where the region has more people with Some College and Associate’s degree than jobs available. Advanced manufacturing, administrative back-office operations (insurance and financial processes), transportation and logistics all require education beyond high school. Strongly suggest conducting a targeted industry study to further define targeted sectors and outreach.
- As noted above for existing employers, document all training offered currently in the region. Work with State Fair Community College, Crowder College, CMU, etc. to determine interest in providing additional training for new operations (and existing firms as noted above) based on skills needed. Contingent on targeted industry study.

- While new company attraction is often considered a brick-and-mortar location, consider opportunities to develop an outreach campaign encouraging companies to hire a “remote” workforce in the region.

Getting Started:

Observation: Bourbon County REDI has an opportunity to be a leader in improving the workforce, but only if it fosters communication and collaboration among a number of partners that all have a piece of the education and training infrastructure in the county. No one entity has all of pieces and without a coordinated effort both residents, especially the incoming workforce, and employers will suffer. As a neutral yet highly interested party, Bourbon County REDI can lead the effort. While there are number of suggestions above about sharing data and information and forming collaborations, doing so incrementally will result in a lengthy process that may not include entities that would like to be engaged. (EG: social service agencies don’t necessarily see themselves being asked to join in education / training discussions although they may have resources to help).

Recommendations:

- REDI should develop and host a workforce summit (half day minimum) to share key opportunities and needs for workforce development. Include employers, K-12 schools, local government, FSCC, PSU, social service organizations etc. Along with the key elements of this report, have speakers who can provide supporting resources, some noted below, to help participants discuss first steps they can take with resources available. Keep initiatives small in number and achievable to encourage continued collaboration.
- Continue Workforce Summit on an annual basis to share information, review progress and develop new approaches as needed.
- REDI should develop resources to hire at least one person to coordinate committees/programs that come from the workforce summit as well as look at other opportunities to develop.

Resources:

ACT WorkReady Community program and other tools: Cheri Hughes. 573.578.6716, cheri.hughes@act.org

Bright Futures USA: Kim Vann, Exec Director. 417.438.4887, kim@brightfuturesusa.org

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL): Matthew Waltz, VP-Partnerships. 920.960.0876, mwaltz@cael.org

Reality Store. Counselor1Stop: www.counselor1stop.org

Employability Report Card and other tools. CJ Huff Group: Dr. C.J Huff. 417.434.8311, cj@cjhuff.com

Bridges Out of Poverty. Dr. Ruby Payne, Aha Process: Tee Bowman. 281.502.3007, tbowman@ahaprocess.com

Manufacturing Skills Standards Council: Neil Reddy, CEO. reddyn@msscusa.org

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