Chatham County Workforce Development Analysis

Prepared by the

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Center for Regional Analysis

In Cooperation with the

Armstrong Public Service Center

On Behalf of

Savannah Economic Development Authority
Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce
United Way of the Coastal Empire

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FOREWORD

START STRONG Armstrong

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to develop an accurate, up-to-date body of knowledge regarding the current state of conditions in the Chatham County labor market. In particular, there was a strong desire to assess the quality of the county workforce from the perspective of human resource professionals, and to methodically consider the role of so-called "barriers" to meaningful employment that could inhibit entry, professional development, and advancement in the workforce.

There was an emphasis, but not an exclusive focus, on entry-level positions. These positions are the first steps that individuals would take into the world of the professional workplace. Entry-level positions are defined as those requiring, at a minimum, high school or equivalent education, and at a maximum, an associate's degree or a post-secondary school credential. In terms of lifting individuals out of poverty in the county learning about challenges and successes in filling these entry-level positions are considered crucial to the long-term well-being of the county economy and the persons, businesses, and organizations that populate it.

Four tasks were undertaken to achieve the goals described.
- First, background research was conducted to guide the direction of the inquiry, assess whether the Chatham County experience with barriers was comparable to that elsewhere, and to provide a set of resources useful in addressing problems associated with barriers.
- Second, a survey of human resource professionals was conducted to learn about challenges faced in recruiting and retaining entry level workers, to obtain an assessment of the quality of the county workforce along various attributes, and to learn of successes in recruiting and retaining entry level workers.
- Third, personal interviews with human resource professionals were conducted to learn more about successes and challenges in attracting qualified entry-level workers. The nature of the personal interaction during the interviews allowed the development of better understanding of the issues faced by human resource professionals.
- Fourth, focus group research was conducted with job-seekers and employers to delve more deeply into barriers to meaningful employment. Representatives of small businesses in Chatham County shared their perspective along with job-seekers. Job-seekers were divided into two groups: those enrolled in training programs at Savannah Technical College, and those based in community resource centers in low income, high poverty neighborhoods in Savannah. These conversations allowed the perspective of small business employers and job-seekers to inform the findings reflected in the survey and interviews with human resource professionals.

Key findings are described next.

Key Findings

Survey of Human Resource Professionals (90 complete responses)

Quality of Chatham County Workforce
- There was less satisfaction with the workforce's ability in: writing skills, business etiquette, oral communication, and math skills.
- Among those most dissatisfied with the workforce, the most commonly cited skills sets needed were for better or more: computer skills, forklift operators, welders, and machinists.

Entry-Level Applicant Pool
HR professionals expressed the following:
- 63% agreed they hired a qualified applicant
- 57% agreed they would train the "right person" if applicant lacked appropriate certification/educ.
- 45% agreed that local applicants do not have the skills needed for the industry or company
- 35% agreed that applicants possess the specific skills needed for the job

HR Search Behavior
- Approximately 12 entry-level openings per 100 employees are expected within 12 months.
  - 81% require a high school education (69%) or less (12%)
  - 24% require a specific certification
- 72% search outside Chatham County for workers
- 28% contact a workforce development agency/program
  - 5% of applicants were associated with a workforce development agency
- 70% of positions are successfully filled
  - 31% filled by applicants from outside Chatham County

Applicants and Screens
- 29 (median) applications were received for each entry-level position
- 25% of applicants met preferred criteria
- 35% of applicants passed the first round of screening
- 81% of applicants with a misdemeanor record remained eligible for the position

Screen Failure Rates
- 12% failed a credit check: administered by 30% of firms
- 17% failed a drug screen: administered by 85% of firms
- 20% failed a background check: administered by 91% of firms

Barriers
- 57% agreed applicants lack enough formal education
- 27% of firms were not accessible by public transportation
- 21% agreed applicants have language barriers
- 20% of HR representatives agreed applicants lack adequate transportation
  - 2% of firms provided assistance for transportation
- 9% of firms provided assistance with child care

Interviews of Human Resource Professionals (20 interviews)

- Expressed that higher wages offered resulted in better recruiting success
- Expressed that automated/computer screening systems would reduce recruiting success
- Impression of Chatham County Workforce:
     40% positive,   30% neutral,   30% negative
- Experienced lower failure rates with screens (compared to the survey)
     drug screen: 7%   credit check: 9%   background check : 11%
- Had little knowledge of existing community supports for entry-level workers

- Characteristics of Ideal Candidates (for entry-level positions), frequency wanting…

Work Experience:	Soft Skills:	Job Skills:
- 85% specific job experience	- 65% customer service skills	- 45% attention to detail
- 45% general work history	- 55% communication skills (w/coworkers)	- 30% problem-solving
	- 50% teamwork	- 30% computer skills
	- 45% business etiquette	

- Challenges Preventing Hiring of Ideal Candidates: Percent citing…

  81% **Problems with Labor Supply** (Applicants): Percent citing…

Attitude:	Skills:	Barriers:
• 55% generational differences in attitudes	• 60% verbal skills	• 40% work experience
• 45% work ethic	• 45% business etiquette	• 25% transportation
	• 40% poor high school education	

  19% **Problems with Labor Demand** (Hiring Process or Job Characteristics): Percent citing…

Job Characteristics:	Hiring Systems:
• 45% Low Pay	• 15% checklist approach to candidate selection
• 15% Lack of advancement opportunities	• 15% over-reliance on HR computer systems

- Successes in Hiring Ideal Candidates: Percent citing…
  4% **Successes with Labor Supply** (Applicants)
       Military experience among applicants

  96% **Successes with Labor Demand** (Hiring Processes/Job Characteristics): Percent citing…

Job Characteristics:	Hiring Systems:
• 50% higher pay	• 45% in-depth interviewing
• 45% in-house advancement opportunities	• 35% willing to train "right person"
• 40% consistent/clear work standards	• 35% word-of-mouth recruiting
	• 35% link to college training program

- Existing Supports for Entry-Level Workers   Desired Supports for Entry-Level Workers

Existing Supports for Entry-Level Workers	Desired Supports for Entry-Level Workers
- 90% in-house job training	- 45% high school work-readiness training
- 50% computer-based training programs	- 30% high school skills training
- 30% tuition reimbursement	- 25% better job fairs
- 25% soft skills training	- 15% day-care availability

Focus Group Research (6 Focus Groups, 55 participants)

- Labor Supply Focus Groups (43 Job-Seekers)
  - Expressed desire for job responsibility and ability to provide for self/family
  - Lack of awareness about community supports for entry-level job seekers
  - Barriers Cited: education/training, transportation, discrimination, criminal record
  - A criminal record is viewed as a nearly insurmountable barrier to employment.

- Labor Demand Focus Groups (12 Small Business Employer Representatives)
  - Expressed strong desire for soft skills (personality traits of personal responsibility, communication skills, problem solving, and task management
  - Barriers Cited: education/training, home-life disruptions, criminal background

- Possible Connections
  - Agreement that education/training deficiencies are a barrier
  - Agreement that criminal background is a barrier
  - Agreement that soft skills (personal responsibility and networking) are important
  - Job-seekers desire workplace experience, and small-business expressed an interest in providing intern-like experiences for job-seekers

- Possible Disconnections
  - Soft skills tend to be valued more highly by small businesses than recognized by job-seekers.
  - Employers view education "beyond the book" as very important, but job-seekers view near-term attainment of an education credential, let alone work experience, as a significant challenge.
  - Job seekers overvalue job availability that comes with attainment of GED/High School Diploma, undervalue the importance of prior work experience when applying for entry-level jobs
  - Employers report that from 7% (HR interviews) to 17% (HR survey) of applicants fail a drug screen, but job-seekers provided varied responses as to whether drug usage was a potential barrier.

Barriers to Meaningful Employment in Chatham County

- Multiple barriers exist.
- Deficiency in education and training was considered to be a significant barrier.
- There was agreement from job-seekers and employers that transportation barriers exist.
- Childcare was viewed by employers as a potential problem among the workforce.
- Criminal background was viewed as a potential barrier, but as a much more significant barrier by job-seekers. Employers indicate that many applicants with a criminal record (81% of misdemeanors, 21% of felons) remain in consideration for positions, but job-seekers in local focus groups considered a criminal record as a nearly insurmountable barrier.

Similarities of Barriers in Chatham County to State, Southeast, and Nation

- The effect of multiple barriers is compounded.
- Deficiencies in education and training are a primary barrier to employment.
- Soft skill deficiencies are a significant barrier.
- Lack of transportation is a significant barrier.
- Screening checks for drug use and poor credit are lesser barriers.
- Possessing a criminal record dramatically alters attitudes toward pursuing employment and has a direct detrimental effect during the job-search process.
- Employers placed a lesser weight on criminal backgrounds by reporting some, but not universal, disqualifying influence, while job-seekers viewed the issue as catastrophic.

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SECTION 1 | UNDER-EMPLOYMENT

1. Introduction

Although numerous indicators suggest an improving state of economic activity in the U.S., there remain deep concerns that the great recession ending in June 2009 has inflicted permanent damage on the U.S. labor force. This concern stems from the unprecedented increase in long-term unemployment over the last 3 years. Since the end of the recession the average weeks of unemployment for an individual has been 36 – reaching a peak of nearly 41 weeks at the end of 2011. Compare this recent trend to the historical average of 13 weeks of unemployment from 1948 through 2009. Furthermore, on average, over 5.6 million people per month have been unemployed for greater than 27 weeks during the post-recession period compared to an historical average of 868,000 people. That job market conditions have shown improvement has been largely muted by its own sluggishness; 11.8 million people willing and able to work remain unemployed as of May 2013, a number that has fallen to about 10 million at the end of 2013.

The weakened state of the U.S. labor market has been attributed to a variety of factors. One view focuses on job skills and spatial mismatch. Indeed, structural unemployment has received considerable attention as industry and human capital levels in the U.S. and abroad evolve in unprecedented ways. In fact, the Manufacturing Institute's 2011 Skills Gap Report finds that 67 percent of manufacturers experienced "moderate to serious" shortage of applicants with qualified job skills. Further, spatial mismatching may occur where individual employment opportunities are impeded by lack of reliable transportation. Still, others cite contractions in aggregate demand or business spending as the primary catalyst for an increase in longer-term underemployment.

According to a Federal Reserve Bank series of nationwide forums and focus groups comprised of employment intermediaries and employers, there exists dissatisfaction with the alignment of workforce development entities and educational preparation. In particular, both a lack of a centralized workforce development agency and the inability of K-12 educators to design curriculum with labor market dynamics in mind served as central factors driving the perceived market fragmentation.

For instance, in the Mobile, Alabama forum, manufacturing employers reported that the educational training-to-employer pipeline was "ill-equipped" to place individuals successfully within the industry. Thus, many manufacturing skills-based jobs are unfilled. The Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council (SAWDC) has established an interdependent channel between K-12 schools and the local and regional labor markets. More details about SAWDC are presented at the end of the document in the "Research & Resources" section.

Underemployed individuals may be those who are seeking full-time work, but are only working part-time due to cut-back hours or economic conditions. Underemployment also surfaces in

situations of underutilization of employee skills, or when an individual is entirely unemployed because of some confluence of employment barriers. As of January 2013, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that there were 7.3 million involuntary part-time workers - people employed part-time because of economic reasons - and 2.6 million people marginally attached to the workforce. The latter category includes those who are willing and able to work, have looked for work in the last year, and have failed to do so within the last four weeks.

Over the last two decades, researchers in the public and private sector have dedicated vast amounts of resources in hopes of better understanding the observed employment patterns at the national, state, and local levels. In general, there exists a gamut of factors that can constitute an impediment to employment, such as a disability, a criminal record, educational attainment, and so on. The problems of underemployment are compounded as many individuals experience multiple barriers to meaningful work, making it difficult to assess whether an identified barrier is the primary catalyst for lack of employment of merely the consequence of related characteristics such as low income.

Seeking to better understand barriers to meaningful employment and causes of underemployment is a key task for researchers and policy makers alike. National analyses are helpful for exploring overarching patterns of underemployment. However, since demographics, industries, education, income, and thus the labor force outcomes differ at the state and local levels, actionable policy should be geared with such differentiating factors in mind. The next section presents a perspective on underemployment in the regional and local economies.

2. The Federal Reserve Sixth District and Low-Wage Unemployment

The sixth Federal Reserve banking district refers to all of Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, and parts of Louisiana and Tennessee. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta's Community and Economic Development (CED) group recently conducted a May 2012 poll of 143 public and private representatives involved in the labor force participation and hiring process of low-skilled and/or low wage individuals within the sixth district. Respondent's views may provide insights into the barriers to employment for low-income groups.

When polled on the most common and detrimental hurdles low income job seekers face, employers responded that skills mismatch and lack of technical training were the major factors (77%). Skills barriers were subsequently followed by lack of transportation or spatial mismatching (64%) followed by lack of "soft skills" (55%), such as social aptitude, personal and hygienic appearance, etc. The list of barriers reported by the employers polled is reported in the table on the following page.

FRB of Atlanta CED Poll:
A Ranking of Barriers to Employment for Low-Wage Individuals for the Sixth District

1	Available jobs require experience, skills, or certification that individuals do not have.
2	There are no jobs nearby, or they are inaccessible by existing transportation options.
3	Workers lack social skills, professional appearance, or appropriate attitude required by employers.
4	Applicants cannot pass background checks for driving record or credit check.
5	Applicants have a lack of skills or access to technology to submit job applications.
6	Applicants fail drug test.
7	Wages are not as good as unemployment benefits.
8	Employment opportunities are undesirable (shift & weekend work, travel, physically strenuous).
9	Unemployment compensation is sufficient to enable individual to search for more desirable job.

In a similar poll of Southeast regional businesses conducted by the FRB of Atlanta, investigators inquired about the quality of the low-wage applicant pool. The results across studies were consistent: lack of technical training was a paramount issue and matters dealing with drug and background screening were of lesser importance. The table below provides these results.

FRB Poll of Southeast Businesses: Quality of Low-Wage Applicant Pool

Chart 2
What's the Quality of the Applicant Pool?

- No or too few applicants with the required technical skill or qualifications — 38
- Once hired, applicants do not perform satisfactorily — 18
- No or too few applicants with the required interpersonal skills — 14
- No or too few applicants — 14
- No or too few applicants that accept the offered compensation package — 9
- No or too few applicants that pass standard screening tests (for example, credit check, drug testing) — 7

Source: Atlanta Fed Poll of Businesses, May 2012

When asked about the primary reasons for this cohort of individuals to give up looking for work, respondents from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta's Community and Economic Development study cited (see the chart below) (1) lack of sufficient income from such jobs to cover the costs of child or elderly care, (2) looking for a long time but quit looking eventually, and (3) unemployment assistance was sufficient to cover costs of living as the most important reasons for dropping out of the low-wage labor force.

Reasons for Decreased Labor Force Participation among Low-Wage Individuals

Chart 3
Why Are Low-Wage Individuals Dropping Out?

Potential earnings cannot cover costs of child care or elder care
- Very important reason: 57%
- Somewhat important reason: 31%
- Not an important reason: 8%

Receive unemployment compensation that is sufficient to cover their financial needs
- Very important reason: 32%
- Somewhat important reason: 35%
- Not an important reason: 22%

Looking for a long time but could not find the right job and gave up
- Very important reason: 51%
- Somewhat important reason: 28%
- Not an important reason: 13%

Currently pursuing college or technical school degree
- Very important reason: 17%
- Somewhat important reason: 35%
- Not an important reason: 41%

Currently pursuing training or certification
- Very important reason: 17%
- Somewhat important reason: 40%
- Not an important reason: 35%

■ Very important reason   ■ Somewhat important reason   ■ Not an important reason

Source: Atlanta Fed Poll on Low-Wage Worker Labor Force Participation, May 2012

3. Chatham County and Under-Employment

In 2013, the unemployment rate for Chatham County was 7.7%, but closed the year at 6.7%, extending the several-year downward trend in the rate. The annual figure for Georgia in 2013 was 8.3%, but by December the rate had fallen to 7.4%. The county unemployment rate was the same as the national rate at year-end, but was slightly above the U.S. rate of 7.7% for the year. To gain a better perspective of the potential barriers to employment, or underemployment, in Chatham County, the county's characteristics can be compared to those of its neighbors and regional peers.

In a recent study by Chmura Economics and Analytics, metrics of underemployment were generated at the county level across the U.S. for the first quarter of 2013. Underemployment was measured as the percent difference between the supply of high skilled workers and the number of jobs which demand such human capital. High skilled workers were defined by their educational attainment of at least a bachelor's degree. A negative measure indicates that there was a surplus of high skilled labor, or that the supply of high skilled workers exceeds the demand indicative of underemployment. The degree of underemployment for Chatham County Georgia was -2%. That is, Chatham County had a lower degree of underemployment than Liberty County (-12.1%), McIntosh County (-18.8%), Jasper County (-9.2%), and Bryan County (-7.6%). Chatham County underemployment was, however, greater than neighboring Beaufort County (7.2%).

Underemployment was more widely distributed across comparable metropolitan areas. For example, Mobile, Alabama, Jacksonville, Florida and Charleston, SC had underemployment rates of -6.9%, -4.5%, and 0.6%, respectively. Overall, the Chmura analysis appears to indicate Chatham County has relatively little underemployment; high levels of human capital and other job skills in Chatham County were not being underutilized compared to contemporary areas. Recall that this pertains to workers with a bachelor's degree.

However, the Savannah, Georgia metropolitan statistical area had underemployment rates for low (H.S./GED) and medium skilled (some college) individuals of 1.2% and 1.7%, respectively. This suggests that the area may have too many individuals with only a high school diploma and some college education in comparison to the existing jobs which demand these skill sets.

While the Chmura analysis suggests that there may be an excess supply of workers with some college or a high school degree, it did not delve into whether the labor pool was endowed with the training and skills desired by employers in Chatham County. This aspect of the labor pool is explored in the following sections of this report. Overall, there is some dissatisfaction with the work force in Chatham County. However, there are some employers that have successfully recruited high-quality workers for entry-level positions in Chatham County's professional workplace environment. Details documenting aspects of challenges and successes in recruiting are provided in the following sections.

SECTION 2 | SURVEY OF
HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS

1. Methodology

A survey of human resource professionals in Chatham County was conducted to capture the employers' perspective on workforce readiness and availability for entry level positions requiring a high school degree or equivalent and a maximum education requirement of a post-secondary school credential (certificate, license, associate's degree). These are the positions that can be characterized as a point of first contact or initial entry into the professional workplace environment for someone with a basic education credential.

A total of 389 human resource professionals were presented a survey by email (304), postal mail (69), or received the survey in person (16) during an interview process. During a six-week period in December 2013 and January 2014, four email invitations to participate in the survey were sent and three invitations (paper copies of the survey) were sent by postal mail. While 108 replies were received, eighteen were incomplete, yielding 90 usable surveys – a response rate of 23%.

2. Results

The survey results (n = 90) were weighted to be consistent with economic structure of Chatham County in the manufacturing (12%) and non-manufacturing (88%, broadly defined services) sectors. The bulk of the actual responses were from manufacturing (37), so readers are cautioned that data reported below for any given non-manufacturing sector is based on a relatively small number of survey replies and may not be representative of the sector as a whole in Chatham County.

Weighted Representation, by Industry

- Service — 21.6%
- Warehousing — 18.3%
- Government — 14.9%
- Healthcare — 13.2%
- Manufacturing — 12.0%
- Logistics — 11.6%
- Employment Agency — 5.0%
- Financial — 3.3%
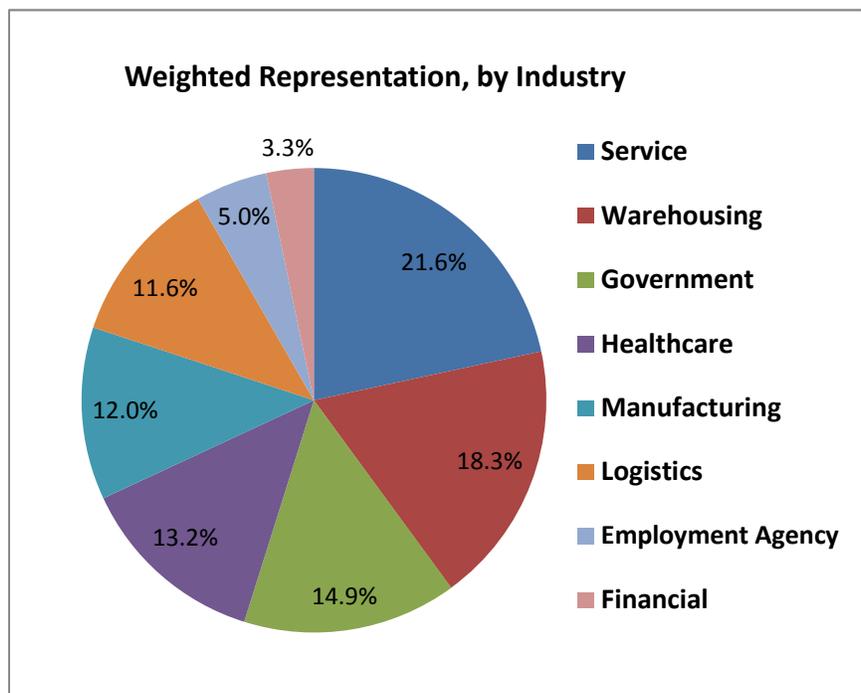
2-1. Results – General Characteristics of Responding Employers

Total employment among respondents (n = 88), varied significantly, from lows in the single digits to many thousands of workers. The average firm size was 333, including full time (270) and part time (63) workers. Median employment was 78 workers.

The **starting pay for entry-level employees** (n = 86) was reported by hourly rate ($11.35) and by annual salary ($32,017). Combined, this data yields an hourly rate of $12.05. As indicated in the chart below, manufacturers paid higher entry-level wages than other industries.

Starting Pay for Entry-Level Employees, by Industry

Industry	Pay
Manufacturing	$13.56
Service	$13.30
Financial	$12.50
Government	$12.50
Healthcare	$11.56
Logistics	$11.33
Warehousing	$10.98
Employment Agency	$8.67
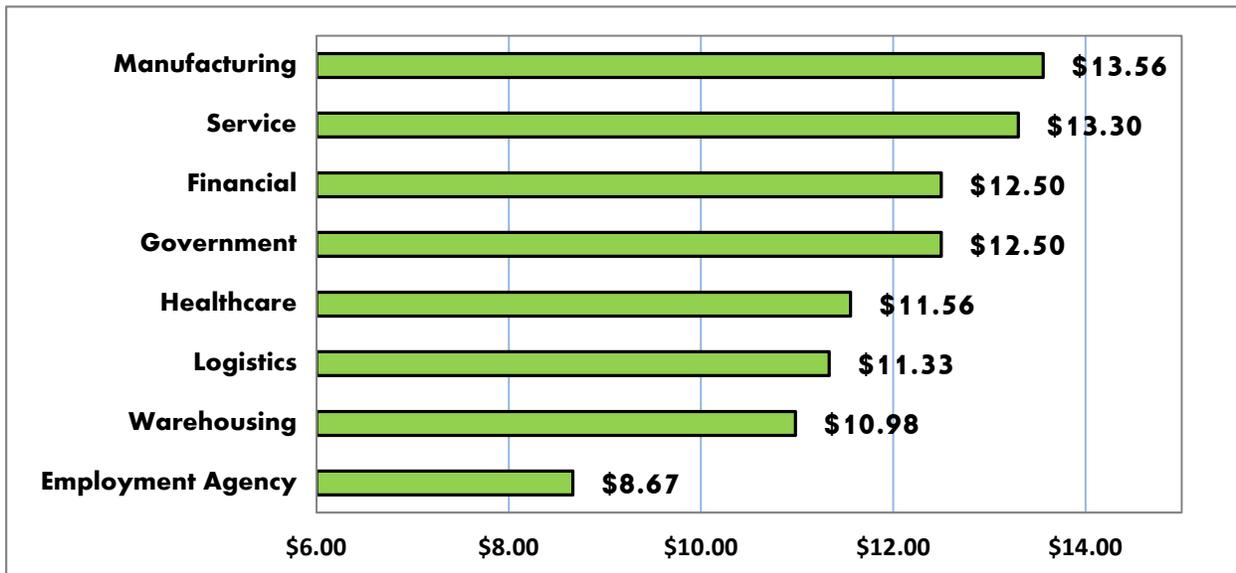
Accessible by Public Transportation
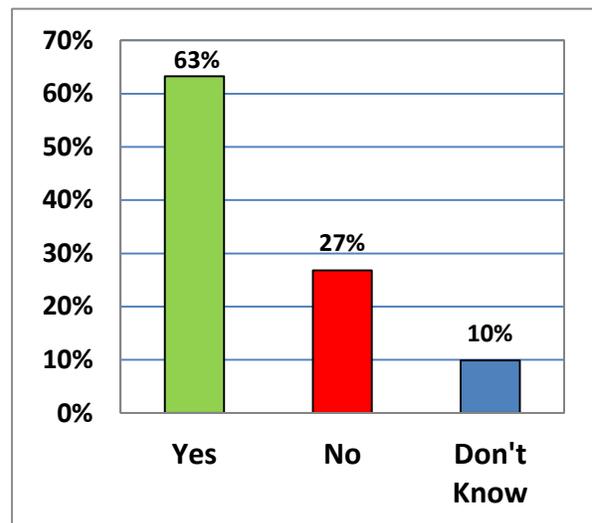
Respondents (n = 90) were asked if their establishments were **accessible via Chatham County public transportation**. Approximately 63% responded "yes" while 27% responded "no." Ten percent did not know.

Yes	63%
No	27%
Don't Know	10%

2-2. Results – Characteristics of Recent Entry-Level Hiring and Screening

In the past twelve months, employers (n = 81) had an average of 34 **positions available**. The median number of openings was 10. The median was lower than the average because of several large employers hiring up to 500 workers. Of these positions, about **70% were successfully filled** (average = 27, median = 7). Anticipated hiring volume is expected to be the same in the upcoming 12 months as it was in the preceding 12 months.

Employers were queried on what **resources were used to search** for persons to fill entry-level positions. With respect to advertising, free on-line advertisements (64%) were cited most often (64%), followed by paid on-line advertisements (59%). Roughly 15% contacted transitional job programs while 28% contacted workforce development programs to search for entry-level workers. Ultimately, five percent of the applicant pools were populated by persons contacted through workforce development programs. **Searching outside of Chatham County** for workers was common – 72% of employers used this strategy to fill 31% of entry-level openings.

Resources Used to Search for Entry-Level Workers
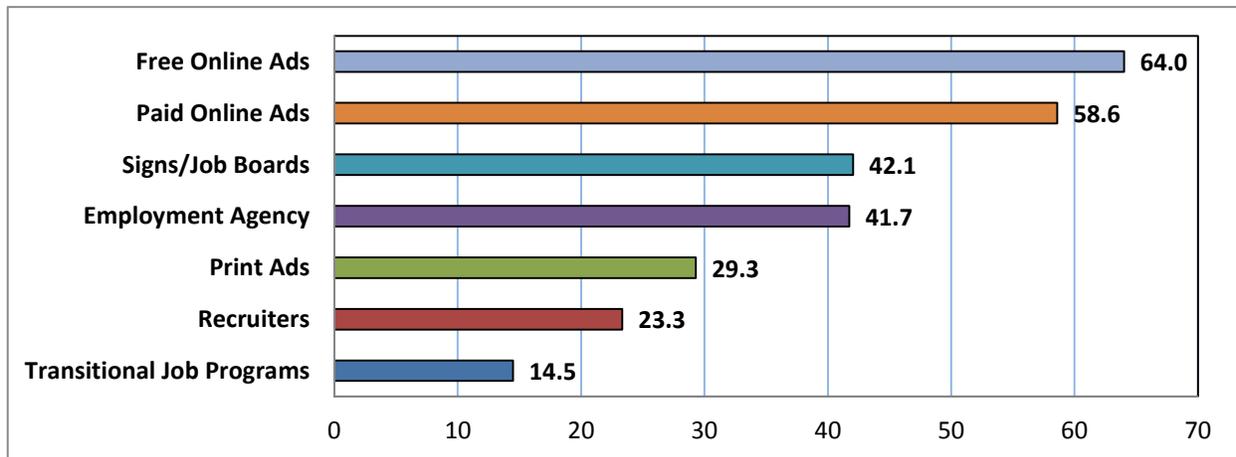

Employer search activity generated an average of 63 (median = 29) applicants per available position. Employers received roughly **twice as many applicants per available entry-level position**. Of these applicants, 39% met minimum job criteria while **25% met preferred criteria**.

Of applications received, **34.8% passed the first round** of screening. The same number (n = 82) of employers responded to questions about disqualifying criteria and the role of a criminal record in the applicant's background. With respect to a **criminal record**, 80.6% applicants with a misdemeanor would be considered for the open position. A felony record weighs more heavily on the possibility of hiring, as only 21.2% of applicants with a felony record are further considered for the open position.

Employers were asked about screening for disqualifying criteria and the failure rates associated with the screens used.

- 84.5% perform pre-employment drug testing
    - 17.0% failure rate

- 91.4% perform background checks
    - 20.4% failure rate

- 30.0% perform credit checks
    - 12.4% failure rate
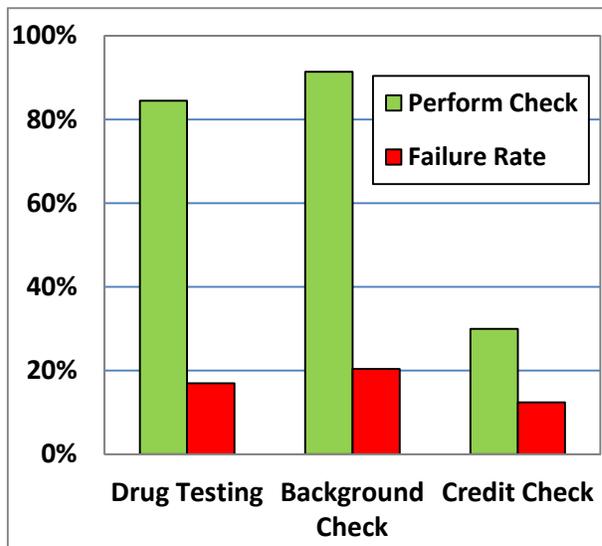
For applicants that subsequently are hired, a wide variety of benefits are offered as an element of overall compensation for the position. Health insurance (85.5%) and life insurance (78.5%) benefits are very frequently offered to entry-level workers. Child care (9.4%) and aid for transportation (1.4%) are not offered frequently as part of a benefits package.

Incidence of Benefits Offered to Entry-Level Workers
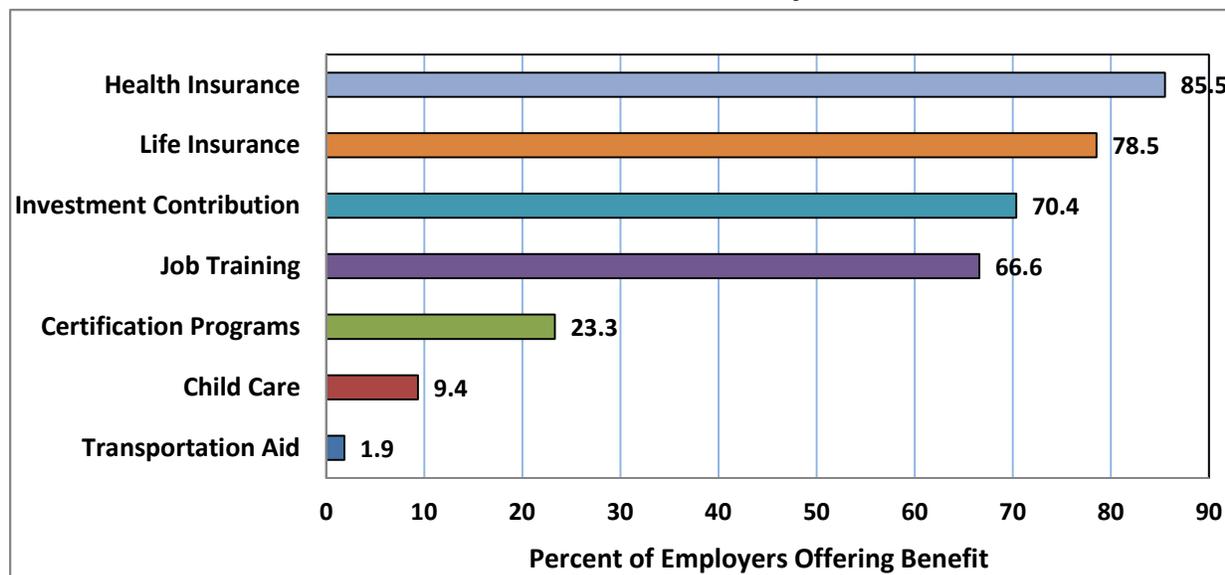
2-3. Results – Quality of Candidate Pool

Respondents were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with statements related to the quality of the candidate pool for entry-level positions. Strong agreement is noted with high scores (5), while strong disagreement is noted with low scores (1). Respondents were offered the option to select a "Neutral" score (3).

As noted above for entry-level positions, the proportion of applicants who meet minimum job criteria or pass the first round of screening was roughly 33%. For 34.3% of the companies, this outcome appears satisfactory, as they agreed with a statement that they receive enough qualified applicants with adequate skills and experience. Further, the highest score noted (3.98) was indicative of **agreement with a statement that the employer fills most positions with qualified applicants**.

However, there was some **indication of dissatisfaction** with the quality of the candidate pool for entry-level positions. A high proportion of employers, 45%, reported that vacant entry-level positions remain unfilled due to lack of qualified applicants and the same proportion indicated that local applicants do not have the skills needed. Further 32.6% of employers admit they sometimes hire an underqualified worker due to lack of qualified applicants.

The table below presents the results of respondents' expression of agreement or disagreement with various statements about the quality of the applicant pool for entry-level positions.

Agreement/Disagreement Questions about Quality of Entry–Level Candidate Pool

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

	Avg.	Percent Disagree	Percent Neutral	Percent Agree
My company fills most available positions with a qualified applicant.	3.98	4.2	32.5	63.1
We will train the right person if they lack appropriate certification or education.	3.73	14.6	28.0	57.4
It is difficult to find job applicants with enough formal education.	3.72	10.7	32.5	56.8
Applicants cannot pass the background/credit check.	3.09	28.4	36.7	44.9
Vacant positions go unfilled due to a lack of qualified applicants.	3.06	39.8	15.2	45.0
Local applicants do not have the skills needed for my industry/company.	2.99	38.7	26.6	44.7
Applicants possess the specialized skills required for the job.	2.95	32.2	33.2	34.6
We receive enough applications that reflect adequate skills and experience	2.89	38.4	27.3	34.3
Applicants cannot pass the drug test.	2.63	45.3	26.0	28.7
Applicants lack adequate transportation to work for us.	2.54	50.5	29.8	19.7
We sometimes hire an underqualified worker due to lack of qualified applicants	2.52	53.6	13.8	32.6
Applicants present language barriers.	2.27	59.2	27.6	21.2

Note: "Percent Disagree" combines responses for "Strongly Disagree" and "Disagree", while "Percent Agree" combines responses for "Strongly Agree" and "Agree."

Human resource professionals were also asked to provide an assessment of the **quality of the Chatham County workforce** assessed along 14 characteristics, including specific cognitive and communication skills (math, reading, writing, oral communication), performance (productivity, work ethic, punctuality, job safety), and soft skills (business etiquette, attitude, reliability, teamwork).

The table below reports the average assessment (n = 88) across the fourteen characteristics by industry. Higher assessments were reported for the financial sector, while lower assessments were reported for the logistics and warehousing sectors. Recall, however, that sample sizes are small for all sectors other than manufacturing and *should be interpreted with caution*.

Quality of Chatham County Workforce, by Industry
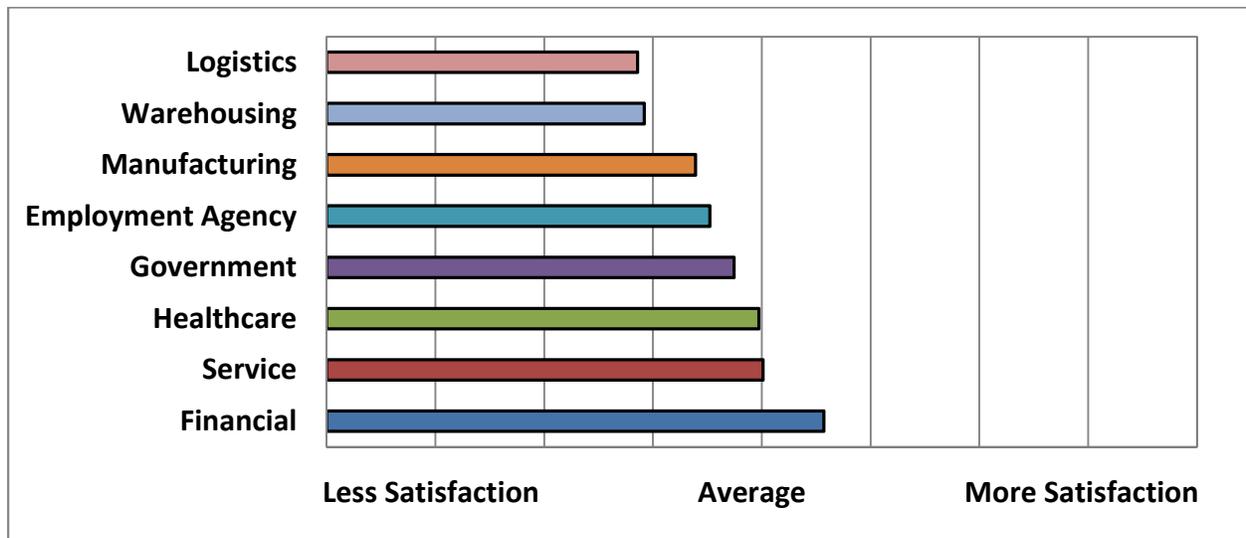
Assessments of the 14 individual characteristics are provided in the table below. More satisfaction was associated with performance measures (productivity, job safety) while less satisfaction was associated with communication skills (writing and oral communication).

Assessments of Characteristics of Chatham County Workforce	
More Satisfaction	Less Satisfaction
Productivity	Punctuality
Job Safety	Computer Skills
Teamwork	Reading
Attitude	Business Etiquette
Reliability	Math
Attendance	Oral Communication
Work Ethic	Writing

The assessments listed in the previous table are further reflected in the chart below that displays the combined percentage of employers assessing the characteristic as "Below Average" or "Poor". Slightly more than half of employers reported writing skills as below average or worse, while **slightly less than half reported unsatisfactory business etiquette skills**. This contrasts with the one-sixth of employers reporting below average or worse productivity.

Quality Assessment of Chatham County Workforce
Percent of Firms Assessing the Characteristic as "Below Average" or "Poor"
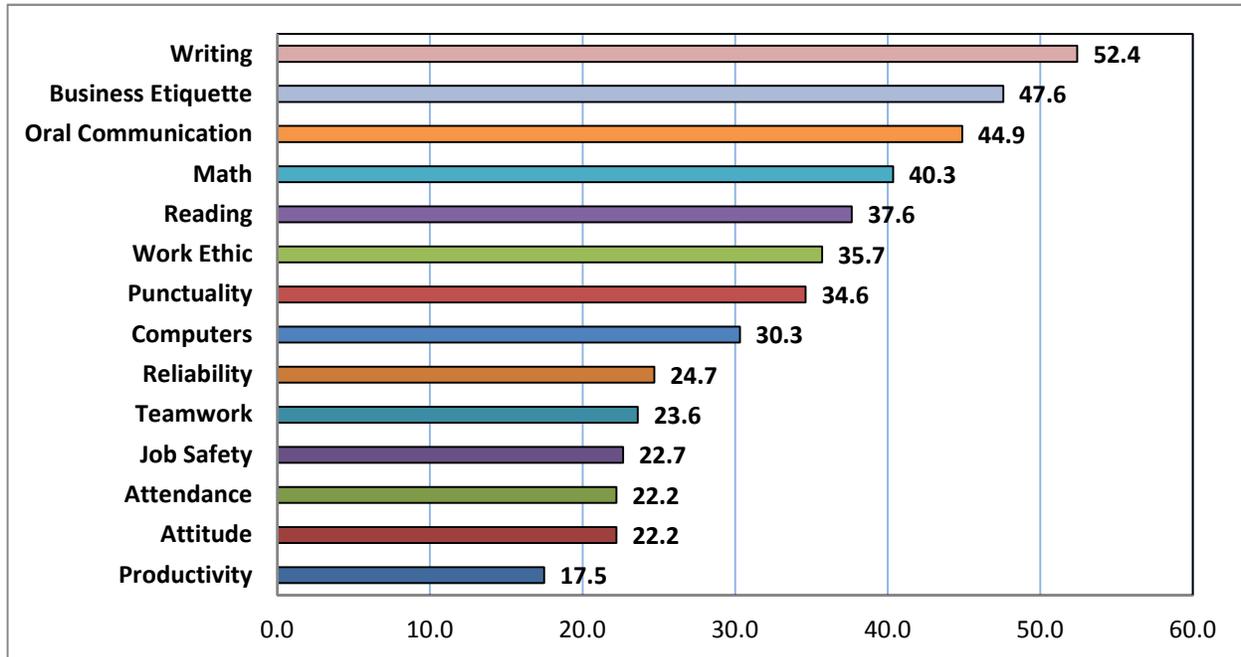
Importance of Workforce Characteristic to the Firm

Employers were asked to rate the importance of the characteristic to the firm. A low score (1) indicated unimportance, whereas a high score (5) indicated the characteristic was very important. **Job safety and math skills were more important to manufacturers,** while business etiquette, computer skills, oral communication, writing, and reading were more important to non-manufacturing (service sector) employers.
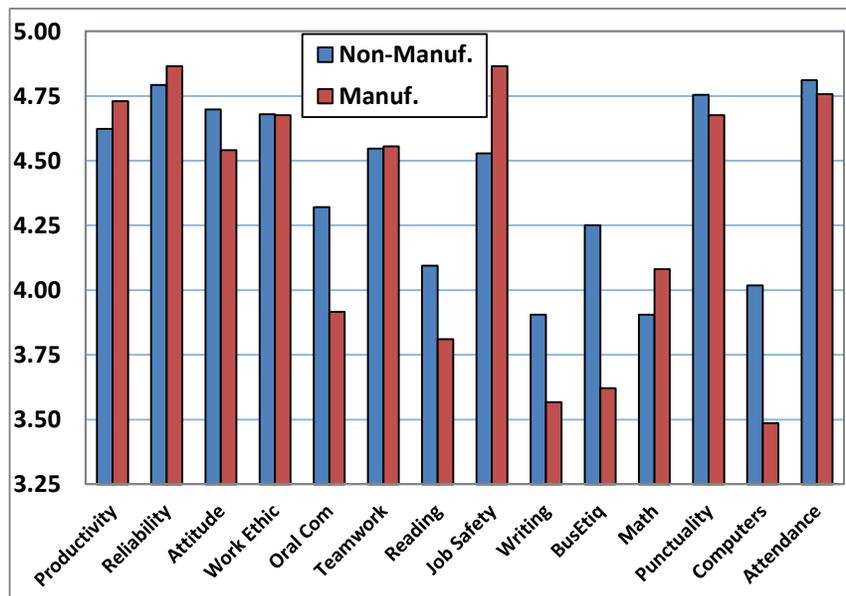
2-4. Results – Anticipated Job Openings within 12 Months

As indicated earlier, employers (n = 71) in the sample expect an average of 35 openings (median = 10) in the next 12 months. Note that the median figure of 10 is likely more relevant among typical businesses in Chatham County because several large employers plan to hire up to 500 workers and this skews the average upward. Whether one considers mean or median, the responses suggest that **for every 100 total workers, approximately 12 entry-level positions** will become available within one year.

Employers (n = 75) were asked to provide the **expected minimum educational attainment** required for the entry-level positions becoming available within one year. A **high school degree or equivalent was required for 69%** of the positions, while another 12% did not require a high school level education. A bachelor's degree was required for 10% while an associate's degree was required for 4%.

Minimum Education for Entry Level Openings within One Year

Category	Value
HS/GED	68.8%
Assoc Deg	4.0%
Bach Deg	10.1%
Post/Prof	5.5%
Certificate	0.4%
No Edu	12.4%
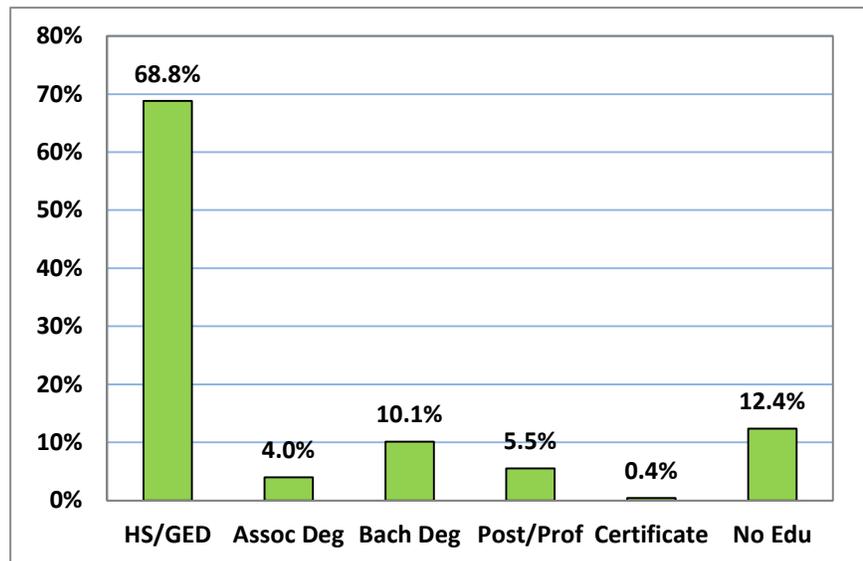
A **specific certification** would be required for **24% of the entry-level openings**. The table at right lists skills mentioned by employers (n=38) that either require certification or represent desirable special skills. The skills are listed in descending order based on total employment at firms mentioning the skill. This yields a notion of the density of demand for the skill.

Skill	Specific Skills Requiring Certification Frequency of Mention	Desired Special Skills Frequency of Mention	Total Employment at Firms Mentioning Skill
Healthcare (RN/NP, etc.)	13	2	5000+
Computer Skills	5	8	5000+
Manufacturing Experience	-	6	1000-1250
Customer Service, Com Skills	-	8	1000-1250
Industry Specific Experience	-	12	250-500
Forklift Operation	5	4	250-500
Equipment Operation	5	4	150-250
CDL Licensed Drivers	3	2	150-250
Safety, OSHA	3	2	150-250
Welding	3	3	150-250
Machine Operator	2	4	150-250

2-5. Results – Survey Analytics

Additional statistical analysis was performed on several subsets of the survey data to uncover the existence of meaningful relationships, or lack thereof, in those subsets of the survey data or across potentially interesting combinations of variables. For example, certain responses of manufacturers and non-manufacturers are likely to be different, certainly with respect to wage rates, but also for other factors. This, and other relationships, are explored in this section.

Analytics: Responses of Employers Expressing Dissatisfaction with the County's Workforce

For the purpose of considering workforce development strategies to address potential deficiencies in the Chatham County workforce, the responses of employers (n = 55) expressing some level of dissatisfaction with the workforce were subjected to additional analysis. In particular, additional consideration was given to the responses of employers who responded with dissatisfaction to the following statements:

- "It is difficult to find job applicants with enough formal education" - - 57% agreed
- "Local applicants do not have the skills needed for my industry/company" - - 45% agreed
- "Applicants possess the specialized skills required for the job." - - 32% disagreed

Employers expressing the opinion that the workforce does not have the skills required are most concentrated in the service, warehousing, and manufacturing industries. It is notable, however, that of these employers, 73% did not contact a workforce development agency or training program to search for potential applicants for their entry-level openings.

Percent of Respondents Expressing Dissatisfaction with Workforce Qualifications
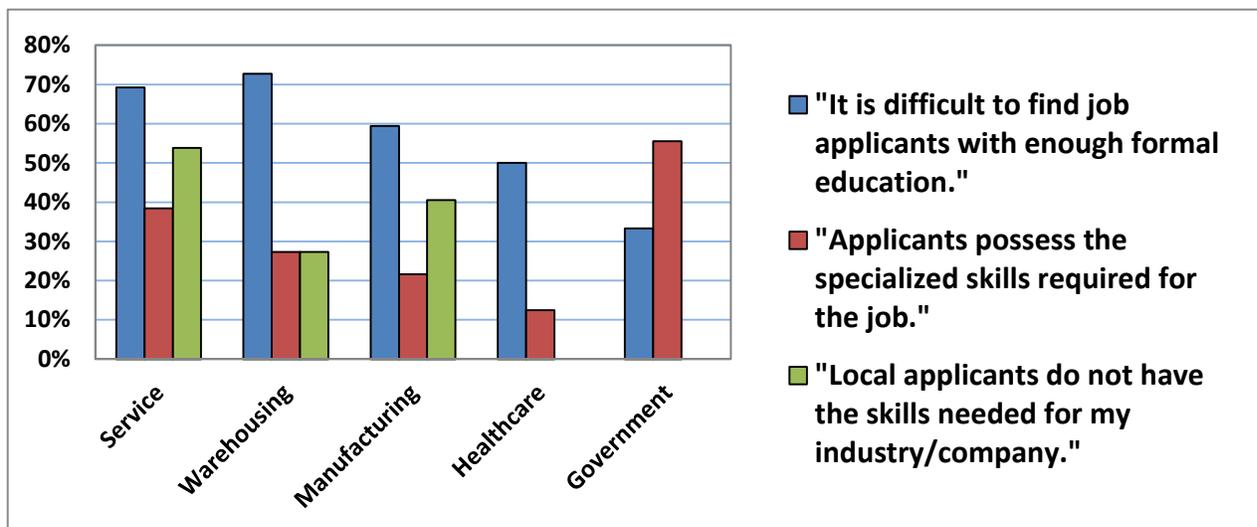
Skills noted as lacking by at least two of these dissatisfied employers (n = 15) consisted of computer skills, specialty healthcare training such as registered nurses and nurse practitioners, manufacturing experience, certified public accountants, forklift operators, CDL licensed truck drivers, welders, machinists, and those with math skills. The skills are listed in descending order given the total employment at firms mentioning the skill. As above, this is meant to provide a notion of the density of demand for skills that the most dissatisfied employers are expressing. Presumably, these skills could provide a potentially fertile area of expansion for programs addressing the deficiencies.

Skills Most Desired by Employers Dissatisfied with the Chatham County Workforce		
Skill Desired	Frequency of Mention	Total Employment at Firms Mentioning Skill
Computer Skills	7	5000+
Healthcare (RN/NP, etc.)	3	3500-5000
Manufacturing Experience	3	500-1000
CPAs	2	250-500
Forklift Operator	6	250-500
CDL Licensed Drivers	3	150-250
Welder	3	150-250
Machinist	2	150-250
Math Skills	2	50-100

Analytics: Responses of Manufacturers vs. Non-Manufacturers

There is statistical evidence (with a minimum of 85% confidence) that **manufacturers pay higher wages and take more applications** for each entry-level position, and are less likely to leave an entry-level position unfilled than non-manufacturers. While manufacturers are more likely to agree that applicants have the required skills for the job, the applicants are **more likely to fail the drug test** than for non-manufacturers. Manufacturers are **more likely to look outside** Chatham County, but fill the same proportion of positions with workers from outside the county as non-manufacturers.

Of the 14 characteristics workforce characteristics assessed, manufacturers were more likely to consider **job safety very important** as compared to non-manufacturers. Manufacturers placed less importance on business etiquette, computer skills, oral communication, writing, and reading (least important listed first). These differences are noted with a minimum of 90% statistical confidence. There was no discernable difference in the manufacturing rating of importance, as compared to non-manufacturers, for productivity, reliability, attitude, work ethic, teamwork, math skills, punctuality, and attendance. This does not mean these characteristics were considered unimportant, it means they were considered equally important by manufacturers and non-manufacturers alike.

Analytics: Relationship between Wages Paid and Assessment of Local Applicants' Skill Sets

Employers **paying the highest wages** ($18 to $25 per hour) were more likely to agree (45% agreed) that **local applicants do not have the correct skill sets** for the relevant industry, as compared to other employers (31% agreed). Among the highest-paying employers, 90% were either neutral or in agreement, while 51% of other employers were neutral or agreed that local applicants did not possess the required skills for the industry.

Among employers paying more than $12.50 per hour, the relationship in the data was weaker than noted in the previous paragraph. Among this group of employers, 37% agreed that local applicants did not possess the required skills, while fewer (30%) of the other, lower-paying employers agreed that local applicants do not possess the required skills.

Analytics: Relationship between Wages Paid and Assessment of Applicants' Drug Test Failure Rates

Employers **paying the highest wages** ($18 to $25 per hour) were **less likely** to experience problems with applicants **failing drug tests** (55% disagreed that applicants could not pass the drug test, as compared to 36% disagreed among lower paying employers). The relationship is weakened as the number of average paying firms considered is increased. Employers paying more than $12.50 per hour disagreed at a lower rate (drops to 47% from 55%) that drug test failures were a problem, as compared to firms paying lower wages (34% agreement).

Analytics: General Observations

Although respondents expressed dissatisfaction, in various forms, with the applicant pool for entry level positions, there was **readiness on the part of the employers to actively participate in the professional development of the employees**. With respect to specific skills, a relatively low 35% of employers agreed applicants possess the skills required for the job. Likewise, 57% agreed it is difficult to find job applicants with enough formal education. However, 57% of employers agreed they will offer training to the right person if they lack the appropriate certification or education. For entry-level positions, 67% of the companies provided job training and 23% provided support for certification programs.

A large majority (two-thirds) of companies in the county have adapted to the workforce to "train-up" desirable skills and support the pursuit of education or certification for their employees if they are the "right person," meaning if the employees are highly productive reliable persons with a positive attitude and a strong work ethic. Soft skills are important alongside productivity.

Employers have further adapted to perceived deficiencies in the county's workforce by **searching outside the county** for qualified workers. Notably, 72% of firms search outside Chatham County for entry-level position applicants, and fill 31% of those positions with

applicants from outside the county. However, given that only 45% of employers agreed that local applicants do not have the skills needed for their industry/company, it implies employers sometimes hire entry-level workers with under-developed skills. This notion is reinforced by observing the 33% of employers agree with the statement that they sometimes hire under-qualified applicants for entry-level jobs.

Rather than looking outside the county, another option for firms is to **search internally by contacting workforce development agencies and training programs** in the county. Twenty-eight percent of employers use this strategy, but the harvest rate appears low. Among companies who contact such programs, approximately 5% of their total applicant pool reflects persons enrolled in workforce development and training programs. This potentially highlights a fertile area for program growth at the workforce development agencies. If employer needs are currently met on a partial basis, communication of specific unmet needs could engender the creation of new training programs at the workforce development agencies.

While employers face challenges in finding applicants with required skills, they also face barriers in hiring qualified entry-level workers because of the previous behavior of the applicants. **Applicants are disqualified for various reasons through screening** that includes drug testing (17% failure rate), credit checks (12% failure rate), and background checks (20% failure rate). However, a large proportion of employers indicate they are willing to hire applicants with a misdemeanor record, 81%. While employers are willing to further consider applicants with a felony record, the survival rate is much lower, 21%. Thus, employers indicate they are willing to look past a criminal record on a case-by-case basis.

Focus group research (See the next section.) with job-seekers paints a different picture of job availability for applicants with prior convictions.. There is a **strong perception among entry-level job-seekers that a criminal record is a nearly insurmountable barrier** to obtaining meaningful employment. Perhaps part of the issue is that job-seekers do not have a clear picture of which employers do not disqualify applicants with a criminal record. This informational gap was articulated by some participants in the focus groups of job-seekers.

When employers were asked to assess the Chatham County workforce on 14 characteristics, more than 40% of respondents rated "Writing", "Oral Communication", and "Math" skills as "Poor" and "Below Average." **Communication and computational skills rate are considered deficient along with "Business Etiquette**," a soft skill that was similarly rated by 48% of employers. In contrast, less than 25% of employers rated "Teamwork", "Reliability", "Attendance" and "Attitude" as "Below Average" and "Poor." This suggests that firms perceive a core set of soft skills among most of their workforce, but that more workers experience difficulty adjusting to the interpersonal and organizational demands of a professional workplace environment.

Employers' ratings of the 14 workforce characteristics were averaged across the categories and reported by sector. Overall, there appears to be **some relationship** between the overall assessment of the workforce in an industry and wage rates paid in the sector. The workforce in

the financial sector and service sector was rated slightly above average, and wage rates in these industries were above average. In contrast, the workforce of the logistics and warehousing sectors was rated at the bottom of eight sectors, and wage rates in these sectors were very near the lowest paid. However, these observations are based on a very small sampling of employer responses from each sector, and **should be interpreted with caution**. A statistically meaningful comparison can be made regarding the overall assessment of the workforce in the manufacturing and non-manufacturing sectors (all other sectors combined). There was no meaningful difference in the overall assessment of the manufacturing and non-manufacturing workforces, but there was a statistically significant difference (higher) in the wages paid to the entry-level manufacturing workforce.

Transportation may be a barrier to meaningful employment for the 27% of employer establishments not accessible via public transportation. While 50% of employers disagreed with the statement that applicants lack adequate transportation, 20% of employers agreed. Further, only 2% of responding employers provide transportation assistance to workers.

Language barriers were considered a problem among applicants for entry-level positions by 21% of employers. Nearly 60% did not believe language barriers were a problem. Manufacturers were less likely to cite language barriers as a problem than were non-manufacturers.

Child care is a potential barrier to meaningful employment that could be an issue for applicants to entry-level positions. Only 9.4% of the employers offered assistance with child care as a benefit to entry-level workers. This could be especially problematic for younger workers who are taking the first steps into a professional workplace and concurrently starting a family.

SECTION 3 | INTERVIEWS OF
HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS

1. Methodology

Approximately 30 human resource professionals from employers in Chatham County were contacted to participate in the study. This invitation process yielded interviews with 20 participants. A list of participating employers is provided on the last page of this section. A professional researcher conducted 30 to 60 minute interviews with each participant. Seventeen interviews were conducted face-to-face, while three interviews were conducted by phone.

A primary topic of interest for the interviews was the employer's experience in attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level workers. The interviewer explicitly defined an "entry-level position" as an initial position within the company that has lesser educational requirements than attainment of a bachelor's degree, but of at least a high school level; participants were reminded of this definition periodically throughout the interview. The researcher asked several standard questions on each topic, and also encouraged free discourse from the participants on the topics at hand.

Topics discussed during each interview included:
- General characteristics of the company
- Recent and upcoming hiring practices
- Screening criteria (drug tests/background checks) used to disqualify entry-level applicants
- Characteristics of an ideal entry-level job applicant
- Challenges the firm has in attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees
- Successes the firm has in attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees
- Existing and desired community resources for attracting, hiring and retaining entry-level employees
- Methods and systems used to recruit entry-level employees

2. Findings

2-1. Business Characteristics and Recent Hiring Data

Participants. Representatives from 20 local businesses participated in the interview portion of this study. Participants were hiring managers and human resources professionals from a representative sample of industries in Chatham County including warehousing, manufacturing, service, education, healthcare, government, and financial services.

Size. Participating businesses employed an average of 816.1 full-time (median = 252) and 129.1 part-time (median = 10) workers in Chatham County. Medians are also reported

because data for several large employers can skew the averages. Participating businesses ranged in size from 17 employees to several thousand employees.

2-2. Hiring and Search Activity

Entry-level hiring volume. The average business sought to fill 66.7 (median = 20) entry-level positions in the 12 months prior to the study. Participants reported filling 75.9% of available positions successfully over that time frame. Participants anticipated trying to fill about 80.1 (median = 42) entry-level positions in Chatham County in the upcoming 12 months, which represents an estimated 20.1% increase over the reported number of positions filled in the previous 12 months. Overall, 10 out of 16 businesses that provided future hiring estimates predicted increased hiring in the future 12 months compared to the prior 12 months.

Hiring and Search Activity

Searched outside of Chatham County	40%
Applicants passed first round of screening	28%
Positions filled successfully	76%
Predicted increased hiring next year	63%
One year growth in entry level positions	20%

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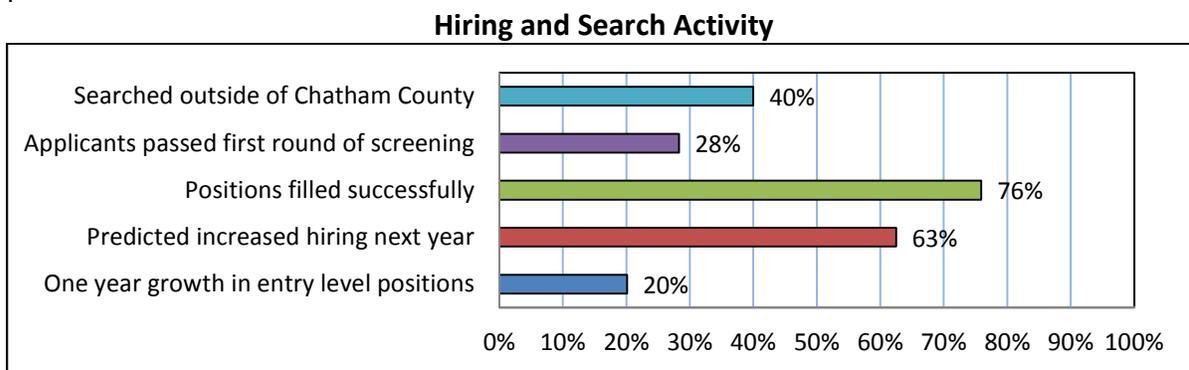
Applicant volume. Firms reported receiving an average of 120.0 (median = 63) applications per available entry-level position. Respondents reported that 28.3% of applicants passed the first round of screening for basic job qualifications.

Externally-filled positions. Eight out of 20 (40%) businesses reported having to look outside of Chatham County to fill some entry-level positions. Multiple participants reported that positions requiring office management skills and positions with significant physical demands were difficult to fill locally. Specific entry-level positions reported to be difficult to fill with local applicants include overnight truck driving, reach-lift driving, office/clerical, human resources, and marketing positions. One employer noted that Spanish-bilingual candidates are scarce in the Chatham County area. Several employers who do not look outside of the area for entry-level candidates noted that they do search externally to locate applicants for more advanced skill positions.

Overall workforce impression. Participants provided an overall rating of the quality of the Chatham County entry-level workforce as generally positive, neutral, or generally negative. Of the 20 ratings, 40% had a positive impression, 30% had a negative impression, and 30% had a neutral impression.

Impression of Workforce

Positive	Neutral	Negative
40%	30%	30%
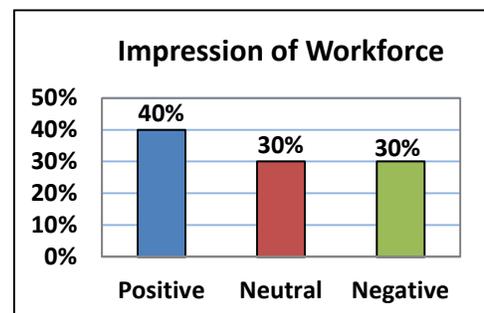
2-3. Disqualifying Criteria

Various factors were reported as disqualifying applicants from the hiring process. Among these factors are criminal histories, poor credit records, and inability to pass a drug screen test. No
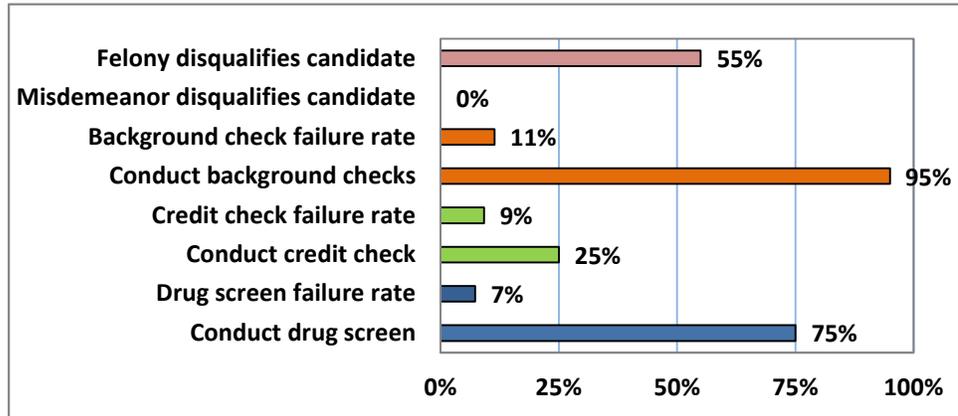
respondents reported disqualified applicants solely for a misdemeanor record, but 55% reported disqualification based on a felony record. Background checks (95%) were most commonly conducted, while drug screens were less so (75%), and credit checks were least common (25%). Failure rates on disqualifying screens were 11% for background checks, 9% for check checks, and 7% for drug screens.

2-4. Characteristics of an Ideal Job Applicant

Interview participants discussed the characteristics that they search for when trying to identify an ideal applicant for entry-level positions. The average participant shared 8.5 characteristics grouped into three categories: characteristics related to prior experiences, characteristics related to soft skills, and characteristics related to skills used on in the workplace.
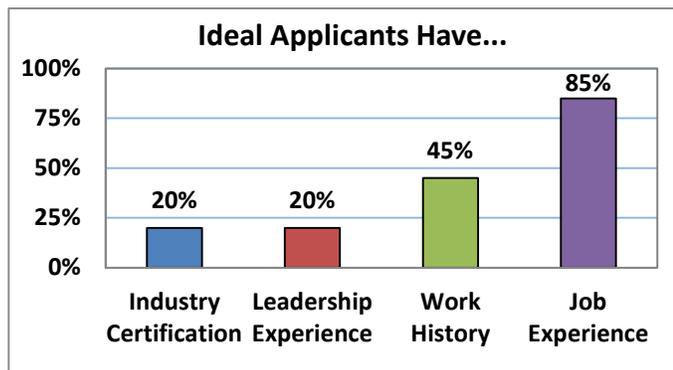
Ideal Applicants: Job Skills

Respondents provided examples of specific job skills desired in applicants for entry-level positions, the frequency of which is reported in the chart below.
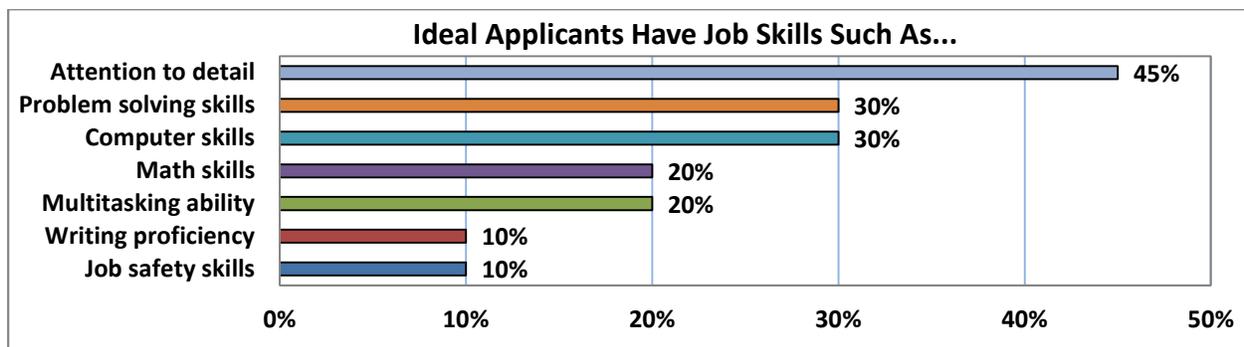
Ideal Applicants: Soft Skills

Traits and characteristics related to soft skills accounted for 48% of all participant responses to a question about desirable characteristics of ideal job applicants for entry-level positions. The frequency of each specific soft skill cited is provided in the chart below.

Ideal Applicants Have Soft Skills Such As...

Skill	Percentage
Customer service skills	65%
Communication skills (w/coworkers)	55%
Teamwork skills	50%
Business etiquette	45%
Initiative	40%
Strong work ethic	30%
Dependability	25%
Motivation to succeed/ambition	25%
Emotional maturity	20%
Desire to start a career in field	20%
Independent thinking	15%
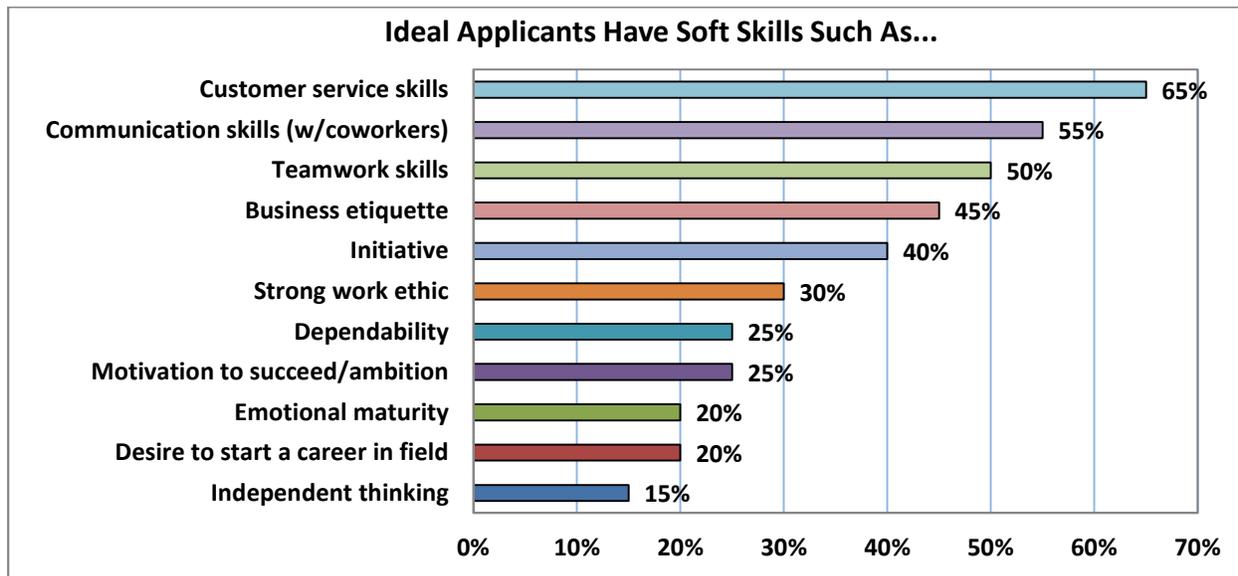
2-5. Characteristics Associated with the Potential for Advancement

Participants were asked to identify characteristics that they associated with employees who advanced past an initial, entry-level position. Overall, each participant discussed an average of 4.3 traits related to advancement. The frequency of each cited characteristic charted below while the general definition of specific characteristics is provided in the table at the top of the next page.

Employees Who Advance: Characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage
Eagerness to Learn	45%
Taking Initiative	30%
Teamwork	20%
Ambition	20%
Relationship Building	20%
Volunteering for Assignments	15%
Leadership Ability	15%
Educational Background	10%
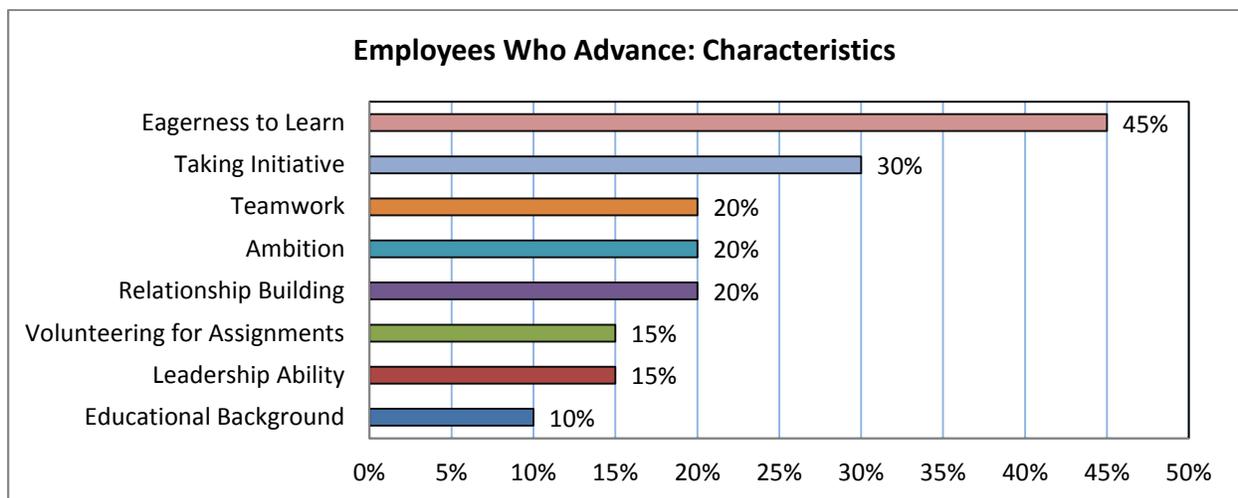
Desired Characteristics for Advancement	Definition
Eagerness to Learn	Learning more about the company's structure and business processes
Initiative	Being self-driven in the completion of projects and advancement of skills
Teamwork	Ability to work cohesively in team environment
Ambition	Exhibiting a desire to advance or to be challenged
Relationship Building	Excelling at building relationships with co-workers
Volunteering	Showing initiative by voluntarily taking on more responsibility
Leadership Ability	Ability to lead others in the completion of projects
Education	Possession of a required amount of formal education

2-6. Challenges that Prevent Hiring Ideal Applicants in Chatham County

Participants were asked to discuss challenges that prevented their company, or competing companies, from attracting and hiring ideal job applicants from Chatham County. The average participant discussed 8.3 challenges that prevent companies from attracting and retaining ideal employees. Challenges related to characteristics of the workforce, or supply-side challenges, constituted 82% of responses. The remaining 18% of challenges related to hiring practices and company characteristics, or demand-side challenges.

Workforce Challenges: Labor Supply/Job-Seekers

Challenges on the supply side of the labor market fell into three general categories: Attitude and behavioral challenges, accounting for 36.4% of reported supply-side challenges; Skill deficiencies, accounting for 40.3% of challenges; and work barriers or general issues that prevent employment in the workforce, which accounted for 23.3% of supply-side challenges.

Workforce Challenges: Local Workforce's Attitudes and Behaviors.
Generational factors. A majority of participants (11 of 20, 55%) noted that generational factors have played a role in recent entry-level hiring challenges. Recent graduates who are coming into the workforce are viewed as having several negative attributes, including a sense of entitlement to a job, a lack of patience with hierarchical work systems that value job tenure over performance, inability to work successfully without substantial oversight and feedback, and a widespread lack of understanding regarding proper business etiquette and workplace behaviors.

Poor work ethic. Low motivation and poor work ethic was the second most-cited challenge related to workforce attitude and behavior (9 of 20, 45%).

Lack of career orientation. Just under a third of participants (30%, 6 of 20) noted that local applicants viewed entry-level positions as a short-term job, rather than as an opportunity to develop a long-term career in the field.

Lack of dependability. Sporadic job attendance, quitting without giving notice, and a general lack of dependability were cited as challenges with the local workforce by 4 of 20 (20%) of respondents.

Other challenges related to local workforce attitudes and behaviors. Multiple respondents cited the following challenges related to attitudes and behaviors in the local workforce:
- Sense of entitlement in the local low-income population (3 of 20, 15%)
- Dishonesty in the entry-level workforce (2 of 20, 10%)
- Lack of initiative (2 of 20, 10%)
- Over-attachment to technology for non-work purposes (2 of 20, 10%)
- Poor quality and attitude of local college students (2 of 20, 10%)

Challenges Preventing Ideal Hires: Attitude & Behavior

Generational factors	55%
Poor work ethic	45%
Lack of career orientation	30%
Lack of dependability	20%
Sense of entitlement	15%
Poor attitude in college students	10%
Time-wasting use of technology	10%
Lack of Initiative	10%
Dishonesty	10%

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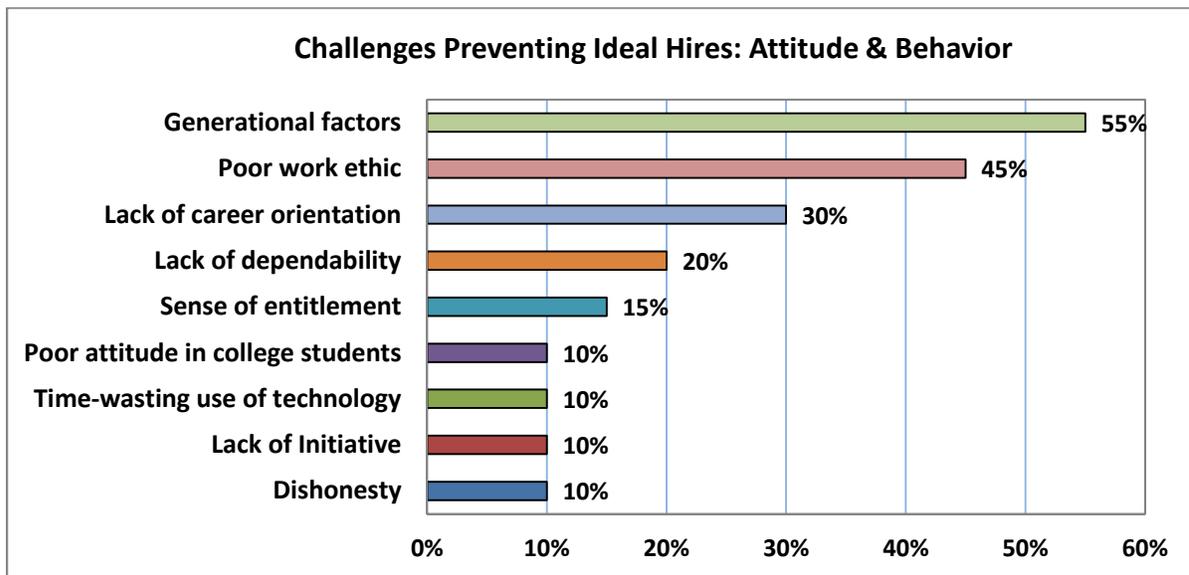
Workforce Challenges: Skill Deficiencies

Lack of verbal communication skills. The workforce's overall lack of verbal communication ability was cited by 12 of 20 participants (60%), making it the most commonly mentioned challenge overall. Many participants expressed frustration with the local populace's inability to speak grammatically correct English, while other respondents cited inability to properly communicate work-relevant intentions and ideas.

Business etiquette. Lack of business etiquette skills was cited as a challenge to finding quality entry-level employees by 45% (9 of 20) participants. Many participants reported problems with applicant dress and attitude during the interview process; several others reported experiencing dress, workplace behavior, and social networking-related problems with entry-level employees after they started on the job.

Poor high school education. Many participants (8 of 20, 40%) explicitly cited the poor quality of the local public high school system as a challenge that has caused basic skill deficiencies in the local workforce, preventing them from hiring quality employees.

Soft skills. Just under a quarter of participants (4 of 20, 20%) indicated that a deficit of soft skills in the local workforce prevents them from finding qualified entry-level employees.

Problem solving. Four of 20 (20%) of respondents cite the local workforce's lack of reasoning, critical thinking and problem solving skills as a significant challenge to filling entry-level positions.

Other challenges related to skill deficiencies in the local workforce. Multiple respondents reported challenges related to workforce deficiencies in the following skill areas:
-   Attention to detail (3 of 20, 15%)
-   Ability to perform physically-demanding work (3 of 20, 15%)
-   Ability to understand human resources standards for job applicants (3 of 20, 15%)
-   Writing skill (3 of 20, 15%)
-   Reading skill (2 of 20, 10%)

Challenges Preventing Ideal Hires: Skill Deficiencies

Skill	Percentage
Verbal communication skills	60%
Business etiquette	45%
High school level education	40%
Problem solving	20%
Soft skills	20%
Writing skills	15%
Adherence to HR standards	15%
Ability to perform physically demanding work	15%
Attention to detail	15%
Reading skills	10%
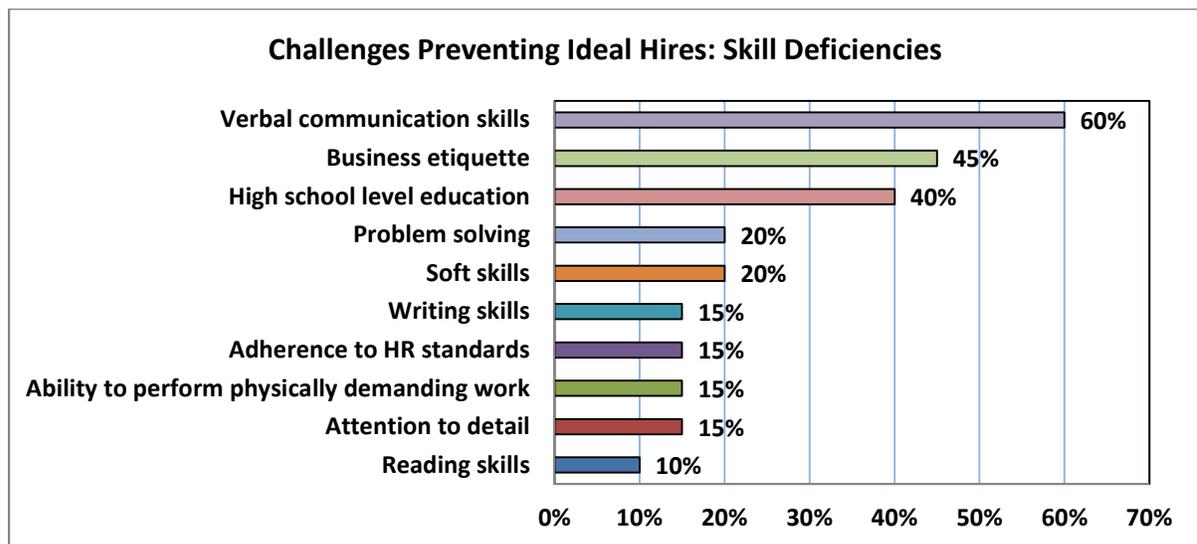
Workforce Challenges: Barriers

Lack of work experience in the field. A lack of desired work experience was the most commonly cited challenge (8 of 20, 40%) that related to barriers preventing potential members of the workforce from gaining entry-level employment.

Transportation issues. Several participants (5 of 20, 25%) noted that issues with reliable transportation prevented entry-level applicants from being hired or prevented hired workers from succeeding at their position.

Problems with the military workforce. Four of 20 (20%) participants reported having issues with successfully hiring entry-level workers from the substantial local military population. Multiple participants reported that members of the military experience difficulty transitioning from the military environment to the workplace environment; two participants suggested that applicants from the military need to have a better understanding of human resources systems so that they understand how to write a resume that effectively conveys their work experiences and skills, and the relationship of those skills to the desired position.

Poor work histories. Four of 20 (20%) participants indicated that the poor general work histories of local applicants provide a challenge to finding qualified applicants, both in terms of continued employment and length of job tenures.

Lack of preparation for the workplace. A lack of preparation for the demands of the workplace was cited by four of 20 (20%) respondents. Participants indicated that even those entry-level applicants who have successfully learned basic skills through local educational institutions often lack the ability to apply those skills in a work environment.

Other barriers to successful employment. The following work barriers were also reported by more than one participant:
-   Drug problems (2 of 20, 10%)
-   Visible tattoos and piercings (2 of 20, 10%)

Challenges Preventing Ideal Hires: Barriers

Category	Value
Lack of in-field work experience	40%
Transportation issues	25%
Lack of preparation	20%
Poor work history	20%
Military transition issues	20%
Tattoos and piercings	10%
Drug problems	10%
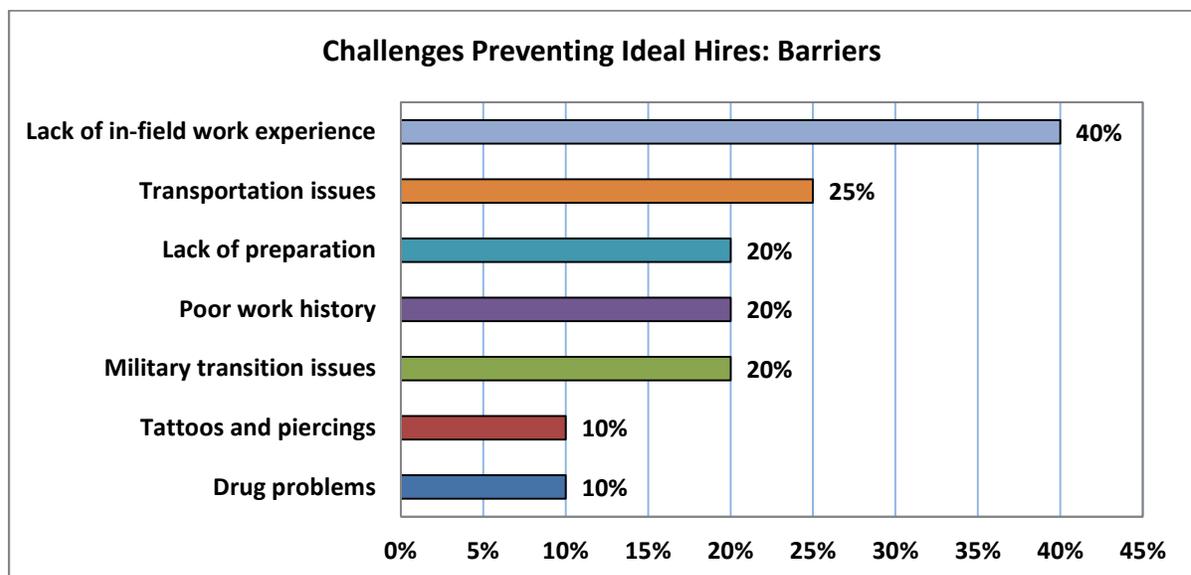
2-7. Workforce Challenges: Labor Demand – Hiring Behavior & Job Characteristics

The vast majority (82%) of challenges cited by human resource professionals were related to issues on the supply side of the market, the job-seekers. However, interviewees also cited problems they face from their own side of the hiring desk. These challenges were related to hiring systems or processes or undesirable aspects of the entry-level positions for which they were recruiting.

Demand-side (hiring) challenges
Low pay. The inability to offer potential employees adequate pay and benefits was the most frequently mentioned demand-side, or recruitment, challenge that prevents firms from hiring ideal entry-level employees (9 of 20, 45%).

Checklist approach to hiring. Several respondents (3 of 20, 15%) suggested that companies that favor a "check-the-box" approach to human resources, as opposed to a more humanistic hiring

approach with fewer applicant prerequisites, are more likely to experience difficulties finding adequate employees in the local workforce.

Lack of advancement opportunities. Three of 20 (15%) participants indicated that a lack of advancement opportunities in the specific company, or in the field in general, limits a firm's ability to attract entry-level talent.

Over-reliance on computers in hiring. Several participants (3 of 20, 15%) suggested that relying on computer-based applicant filtering systems, rather than human-centered selection processes, hinders a firm's ability to identify quality local applicants.

Recruiter bias. Three of 20 (15%) participants indicated a belief that bias on the part of individuals in charge of hiring and recruiting can play a substantial role in a firm's inability to locate qualified local applicants.

Other demand-side hiring challenges. Other challenges that were reported by multiple respondents include:
- Difficulty recruiting qualified minority candidates (2 of 20, 10%)
- Inconsistent management standards/behaviors causing turnover (2 of 20, 10%)
- General entry-level turnover issues (2 of 20, 10%)

Challenges Preventing Ideal Hires: Hiring Process & Jobs

Challenge	Percentage
Low pay	45%
Recruiter bias	15%
Over-reliance on computers	15%
Lack of advancement opportunity	15%
Checklist approach to hiring	15%
Inconsistent management standards	10%
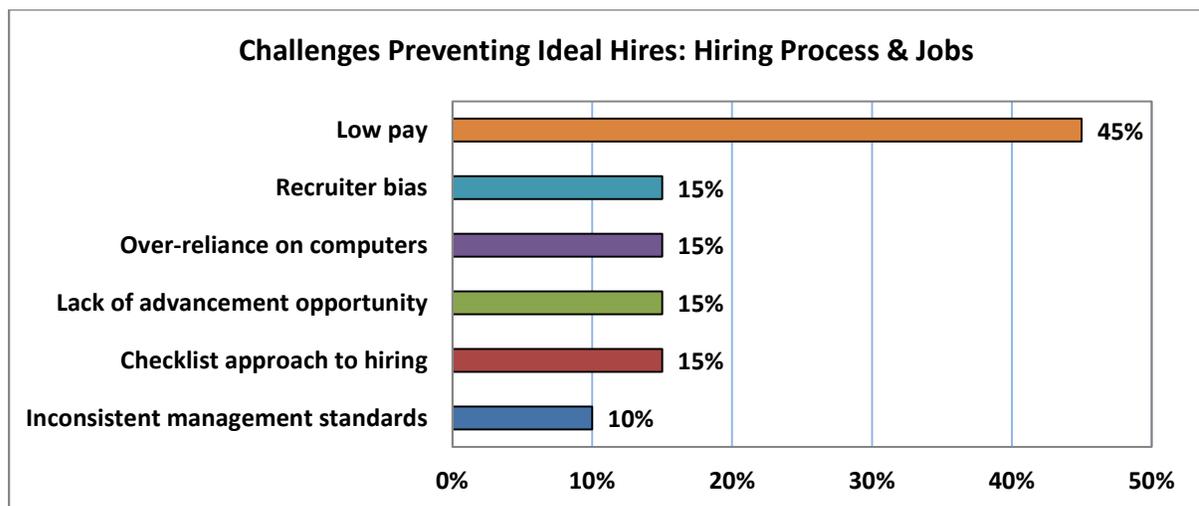
2-8. Hiring Successes

Participants were asked to discuss factors that have helped their company successfully identify and hire applicants for entry-level positions. On average, participants provided 6.7 factors that positively contribute to their entry-level hiring success. Just 3.7% of reported factors pertained to positive characteristics of the local workforce; the remaining 96.3% of factors referred to company practices that lead to successful hiring and retention.

Successes: Labor Supply

Military presence in the local workforce. Two of 20 (10%) participants indicated that Chatham County's large military-related population provided them with quality applicants and disciplined, successful workers. The quality of workers derived from the military population was the only response offered by multiple participants that tied hiring successes to characteristics of the local workforce.

Successes: Labor Demand - Hiring Practices.

In-depth interviewing. Taking the time and effort to screen entry-level applicants using in-depth behavioral questioning and skills testing was the most commonly cited practice related to hiring success (11 of 20, 55%). Using multiple interviewers per applicant (9 of 20, 45%), requiring interviewers to take interview training courses (7 of 20, 35%), and conducting multiple interviews over time with each applicant (6 of 20, 30%) were all frequently mentioned as aspects of the interview process that correlate with making successful hires.

High pay and benefits. A majority of participants (10 of 20, 50%) suggested that offering employees higher pay and better benefits than competing firms was key to successfully attracting qualified entry-level talent.

In-house advancement opportunities. Nine of 20 (45%) participants indicated that the presence of advancement opportunities provided their firm with a competitive advantage over other companies that lack those opportunities. In some cases advancement opportunities consisted of the ability to advance to management or skilled positions, while in other cases advancement opportunities referred to clearly defined and accessible opportunities for wage increases.

Consistent, clear work standards. Providing entry-level applicants and new entry-level employees with a clear picture of work requirements and performance standards was cited as a contributor to successful entry performance by 8 of 20 (40%) participants.

Willingness to teach job skills to "the right person." Just over one-third of participants (7 of 20, 35%) indicated that their firm was willing to hire and train an applicant that they deemed a quality candidate, despite a lack of appropriate prior job experience.

Word-of-mouth recruiting. Successful reliance on word-of-mouth recruiting and in-house employee referral was reported by 7 of 20 (35%) participants.

Relationships with college-level training programs. A successful training relationship with a local college or university was reported by just over one-third of participants (7 of 20, 35%).

Contact time pre-employment. Several participants (6 of 20, 30%) noted the importance of engaging in as much contact time as possible with applicants, prior to deciding on whether to offer a position.

Other factors related to hiring success. Other factors that were reported to contribute to hiring success by multiple participants include:
- Company's reputation in the community (5 of 20, 25%)
- Deriving applicants from work transition programs (4 of 20, 20%)
- Testing applicants for computer skills (4 of 20, 20%)

- Relationships with high school skill training programs (4 of 20, 20%)
- Testing applicants' personalities using psychometric measures (3 of 20, 15%)
- Remaining unbiased when considering candidates (3 of 20, 15%)
- Conducting interviews in large groups (2 of 20, 10%)
- Having a flat, non-hierarchical corporate structure (2 of 20, 10%)
- Using online mass-recruitment services (2 of 20, 10%)
- Recruiting at job fairs (2 of 20, 10%)
- Providing internship opportunities (2 of 20, 10%)
- Providing employees with a friendly, pleasant work environment (2 of 20, 10%)
- Testing applicants for writing skills (2 of 20, 10%)

Hiring Successes: Hiring Process

Category	Percentage
High Pay and Benefits	50%
In-house Advancement Opportunities	45%
Consistent, Clear Work Standards	40%
Relationships with College-level Training Programs	35%
Word-of-Mouth Recruiting	35%
Willingness to Train	35%
Pre-employment Contact	30%
Company Reputation	25%

2-9. Existing Supports and Programs for Entry-Level Employees

Participants were asked to report in-house and community programs that provide support for entry-level employees. Participants displayed very little interest, or awareness, regarding local community support programs, as all response focused on in-house support opportunities. On average, participants reported 2.5 existing in-house programs that their employees can access for support.

In-house job training. All but two (18 of 20, 90%) participants indicated that their company provided some level of in-house job training for entry-level employees. Reported training programs varied greatly, ranging from lengthy pre-employment training workshops, to periodic weekend training sessions, to supervised on-the-job training.

Computer-based training. Ten of 20 (50%) participants reported that entry-level employees had access to computer-based training systems that allowed them to learn more about the company's business practice and/or learn more about relevant job skills.

Reimbursement programs.   Six of 20 (30%) participants indicated the availability of tuition reimbursement programs for entry-level employees who pursued job-relevant educational opportunities.

Soft skills training. Workshops focusing on teaching employees soft skills or communication skills were offered by one-quarter (5 of 20, 25%) of participating firms.

Paid certifications.   Three of 20 (15%) participants reported that their company pays for entry-level employees to obtain relevant industry certifications, as required for their position.

Apprenticeship program.   Two of 20 (10%) participating firms offered entry-level employees the opportunity to train for several months under an expert in the field during their initial employment period.

In-house volunteer opportunities.   Two of 20 (10%) participants indicated that their company provided employees with volunteer opportunities that give an employee experience with skills required to advance within the company.

Existing Supports for Entry-Level Employees

Support	Percentage
In-house job training	90%
Computer-based training	50%
Tuition reimbursement	30%
Soft skills training	25%
Paid certifications	15%
In-house volunteer opportunities	10%
Apprenticeship program	10%
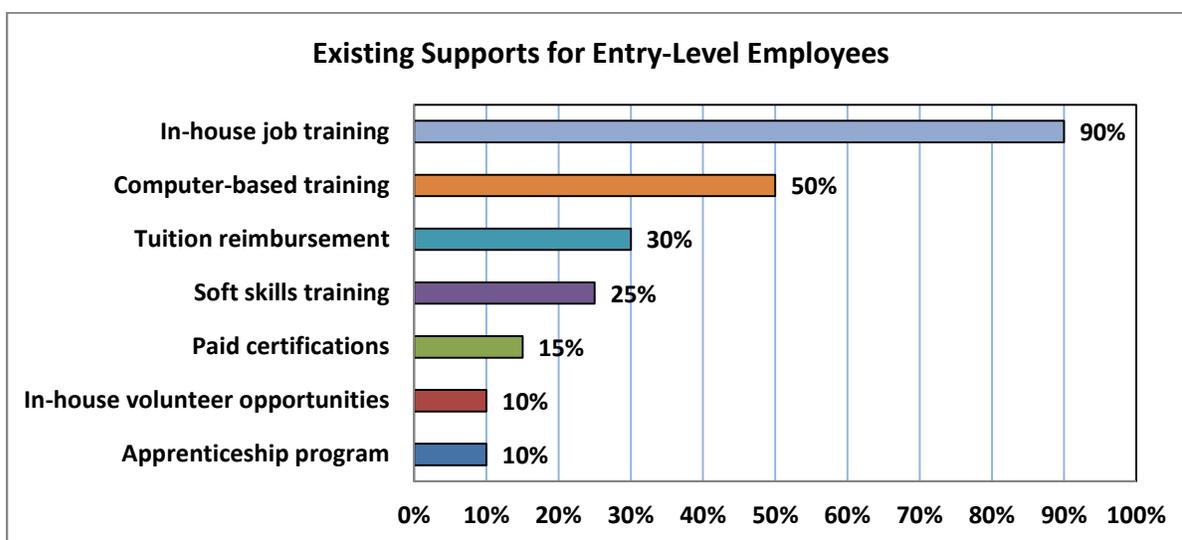
2-10. Desired Supports and Programs for Entry-Level Employees

When prompted to discuss supports and programs that would improve the quality of the workforce, participants cited an average of 2.1 programs apiece. In contrast to the existing programs, which tended to be in-house, participants desired community support programs to improve the quality of the local workforce.

High school workplace readiness education. Nearly half of participants (9 of 20, 45%) suggested that improvements in high school workplace education would improve the quality of the local entry-level applicant pool.   In particular, respondents desired better education regarding business etiquette and appropriate behaviors within the workplace. Others suggested that students needed

better basic job skills instruction regarding how to write resumes, how to apply for jobs, how to interview, and which jobs are appropriate to apply for based on their skills and experiences.

Development of high school skill training programs. Several (6 of 20, 30%) participants indicated a desire for local high schools to develop skill training programs tailored to their industry's, or their company's, particular job requirements. Specific desired program areas include welding, logistics, and office skills.

Better job fairs. Five of 20 (25%) respondents suggested that the existence of better job fairs could improve their ability to identify potential entry-level applicants. Multiple participants noted that potential applicants don't seem to take existing job fairs seriously.

Day care availability. Development of programs to provide the entry-level workforce with emergency day care services were desired by 3 of 20 (15%) respondents.

Business education in high school. More widespread education regarding how businesses operate were mentioned by 3 of 20 (15%) participants.

Financial education. Two of 20 (10%) participants indicated that the entry-level workforce needs better education regarding managing finances.

Career center investment. Two of 20 (10%) participants suggested that greater investment in local career centers may improve workforce quality by helping to guide entry-level applicants to appropriate skills development and job opportunities.

Desired Supports for Entry-Level Employees

Support	Percentage
High School Workplace Readiness Education	45%
Development of High School Skill Training…	30%
Better Job Fairs	25%
Business Education in High School	15%
Day Care Availability	15%
Career Center Investment	10%
Financial Education	10%
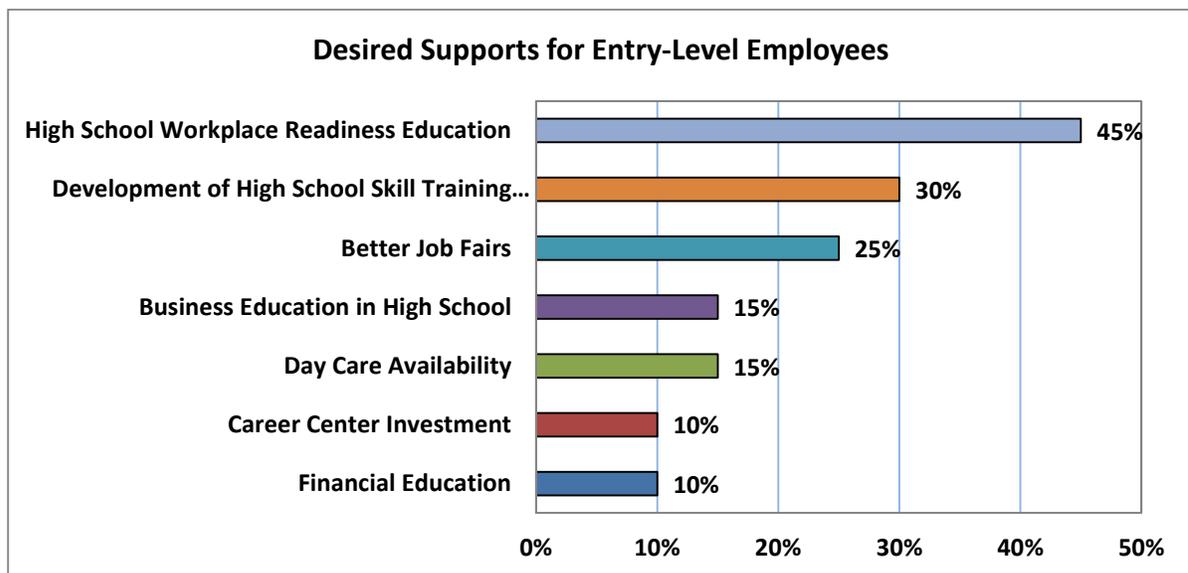
2-11. Employers Participating in HR Interviews

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Atlantic Radiology Associates, LLC
City of Savannah
Colonial Group, Inc.
DIRTT Environmental Solutions
Georgia Ports Authority
Georgia Power
Gregory M. Parker, Inc.
Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation
IKEA Distribution Services, Inc.
Memorial University Medical Center, Department of Radiology
Nordic Logistics and Warehousing, LLC
St. Joseph's/Candler Health System
Shaw Industries
Southcoast Medical Group, LLC
Southern Aviation Parts and Services
The Home Depot – Savannah Distribution Center
The Savannah Bank
Wells Fargo
Weyerhaeuser

Section 4 | Focus Group Analysis

1. Section Overview

Six professionally facilitated focus group discussions were conducted in Chatham County to develop a better understanding of important issues pertaining to challenges in securing meaningful employment from the perspective of Job-seekers (labor supply) and employers (labor demand). Four focus groups were conducted with 43 potential labor suppliers, while two focus groups were conducted with 12 employers. On the supply side, two groups were comprised of persons from lower income communities seeking jobs and two groups were comprised of persons enrolled in training programs at Savannah Technical College (STC). The final two groups were comprised of small business owners or their representatives and characterize the perspective of labor demand.

Labor Supply (Job Seekers)

In terms of why they would pursue an ideal job, community-based focus group participants cited aspects of professional development, responsibility, and helping others much more frequently than providing for self and family or earning income. Job seekers relied on social networks to support their job-seeking activity, but exhibited lower awareness of community programs (financial assistance, training programs, career counseling, financial education, among others) that support persons on the path to meaningful employment.

In the community-based focus groups, job seekers cited challenges associated with education and training, childcare, and discrimination as the three most significant barriers to meaningful employment. Among those job seekers enrolled in the STC training programs, the three most significant barriers were criminal background, transportation, and education and training. Both groups discussed criminal background more extensively and both groups mentioned childcare as a challenge.

Labor Demand (Small Business Employers)

When asked about desired skills for entry-level applicants, the small business owners cited aspects of "soft skills" more than specific job-related education, skills, or experiences. These soft skills include personality traits desirable in the workplace (dependable, respectful, accountable, and positive attitude), communication skills (correct English skills, listening skills, adapting communication skills to different audiences), and problem solving/task management skills (prioritize, follow directions, learn quickly, and work independently). Similar skills were identified as being important for the purposes of advancing beyond entry level skills, but also included developing a vested interest in the success of the business, willingness to learn, and ability to work in teams.

The top three hiring challenges reported by small businesses were lack of education or training, problematic home life of employees, and criminal background. While small business representatives were confident they could overcome education and training issues, the home life of employees or the criminal background of applicants were challenges that were more problematic to address in the long run. In many instances, company policy or insurance required the screening of applicants with a criminal background.

Potential Disconnections

Small business representatives very strongly emphasized the importance of soft skills in both the hiring process and advancement process in the workplace. Job-seekers in the focus groups did not articulate this as a potential challenge in finding meaningful work, other than citing "it's who you know" as a challenge, indicating tangential awareness that networking skills can be important in finding work and career advancement.

Challenges pertaining to "Home Life" presented a significantly greater barrier to meaningful employment among small business employers than job-seekers. Employers observe that a challenging "Home Life" (stress over home finances, relationships with family members, drug problems in the home, domestic violence) spills over into the workplace in the form of reduced productivity and job attendance issues. Given that far fewer job-seekers cited this as a barrier, this suggests that job-seekers may lack a clear understanding of how these home life issues affect productivity in a fast-paced, constantly evolving small business workplace that requires teamwork among focused employees.

The issue of drug usage as a barrier to employer is a potential disconnect between job-seekers and employers. Employers report that from 7% (HR interviews) to 17% (HR survey) of applicants fail a drug screen, but job-seekers provided varied responses as to whether drug usage was a potential barrier. For example, when job-seekers from high poverty, low income neighborhoods were asked to list the top three barriers to meaningful employment drug usage ranked ninth of ten identified barriers. However, among job-seekers in the training programs at Savannah Technical College, drug usage ranked fourth of ten identified barriers.

While both job-seekers and small business representatives cited lack of education and training as a barrier to meaningful employment, job-seekers tended to view the achievement of near-term (one year) educational milestones (GED, certificate, etc.) as a potentially daunting challenge. Small business representatives emphasized that educational attainment was insufficient in and of itself, that more practical knowledge and applied use of book-skills is important for job-seekers. Given that job-seekers in education and training programs view the near-term completion of a GED, for example, as a potentially challenging matter, they are even more hard-pressed to accumulate the practical and applied experience that small business owners appear to be seeking. However, this last observation leads to a potential connection discussed next.

Potential Connections

Job-seekers in the focus groups expressed an interest and desire for work experiences and job training programs *in the workplace* that could enhance their skill-sets. Small business employers expressed a strong desire for *applicants with workplace experience*. Further, some small business employers expressed a willingness to offer internships that can help job-seekers and students develop the practical workplace experiences that employers seek. Businesses that are willing to offer internship-like experiences are likely to find willing participants. The members of the job-seeking focus groups expressed an interest in those development opportunities.

There is agreement from representatives of the labor market's supply and demand side about the challenges presented by transportation and childcare. With respect to transportation, this suggests that enhanced public transportation options or more widespread use of transportation related benefits and subsidies (vouchers or grants) could address this commonly recognized challenge. Improving access to childcare in the community also could mitigate a challenge faced by job-seekers and small business employers.

Detailed Report of Focus Group Research

The report provided by *bluknowledge LLC*, the consulting firm retained to conduct the focus group analysis, is reproduced on the pages that follow with minor modification for formatting. There is a thorough discussion of the focus group methodology, focus group dynamics, and results. The discussion is far more detailed and rich in presentation than in this brief overview of the research.

Workforce Development | Focus Group Summary

Job Seekers and Small Businesses in Savannah, Georgia

December 2013

Prepared by:

Erika D. Tate, PhD
bluknowledge LLC
Savannah, Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

The Savannah Economic Development Authority, Savannah Chamber of Commerce, and the United Way of the Coastal Empire commissioned a study of the workforce in Savannah, Georgia. These agencies seek to understand:

- Challenges that residents face when seeking meaningful employment

- Small business community's perceptions of the applicant pool for potential employees

This study focuses on job seekers who are in pursuit of, or have achieved, a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or high school diploma, technical or associates degree, or relevant certifications and licensures. The potential employment opportunities explored in this study might require some or all of these education achievements. Possible positions include, but are not limited to: administrative assistants (e.g., receptionist or data entry), sales staff, paraprofessionals, craft or construction laborers, and machine operators.

As part of this study, *bluknowledge LLC* was hired to conduct primary research in the form of focus group interviews. The summary of findings communicated in this research brief is intended to inform the greater workforce study.

METHODS | FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

In November 2013, *bluknowledge LLC* conducted six focus groups. Four focus groups included a total of 43 participants pursuing a GED certificate or a technical certificate or degree. Two focus groups included a total of 12 small business owners and representatives.

Participants

Job Seekers | Community

Twenty participants were enrolled in a GED program at a community site. These community participants were recruited because they were likely to live in low income or high unemployment census tracts.

Seventeen (85%) participants completed the demographic survey.

- Twelve survey respondents (71%) reported their gender as female and five (29%) survey respondents reported their gender as male.

- Seventeen survey respondents (100%) reported their race as African-American.

- Fourteen survey respondents (82%) reported an income less than $19,999.

- Eleven survey respondents (65%) reported the receipt of public assistance (SNAP or WIC benefits).

See Appendix A for complete demographic information.

Job Seekers | Campus

Twenty-three participants were enrolled in a GED or trade-skills program on the Savannah Technical College campus. These campus participants were recruited because they were (a) concurrently enrolled in a GED and trade-skills program or (b) identified as "Fast Track" students who were expected to attain a GED certificate within three to six months.

Twenty-two (96%) participants completed the demographic survey.

- Eight survey respondents (36%) reported their gender as female and thirteen (59%) survey respondents reported their gender as male. One survey respondent did not answer the question.

- Fourteen (64%) survey respondents reported their race as African-American, five (23%) survey respondents reported their race as White, and one (5%) survey respondent reported his race as Hispanic.

- Three survey respondents (14%) reported an annual income less than $19,999 and eleven survey respondents (50%) reported an annual income between $20,000 and $34,999.

- Five survey respondents (23%) reported the receipt of public assistance (SNAP or WIC benefits).

See Appendix A for complete demographic information.

Small Businesses

Twelve small business owners or representatives participated in two small business focus groups. There were eight participants in first group and four participants the second group. These participating small businesses represented multiple industries (e.g., manufacturing and home care assistance) and various sizes (4 - 1000 employees). See Table 1.

Table 1 | Small Business Participants (Industry and Size)

Industry	# Employees
Advertising Promotional Products	9
Architecture and Interior Design	14
Auto Repair and Maintenance	160
Business Advisory and Accounting	4
Business Telecommunications and Networking	16
Construction	20
Fire, Water and Mold Cleanup, and Restoration	22
General Contractor	14
Healthcare	10
Home Care and Assisted Living	1000
Legal and Identity Theft	40
Manufacturing Corrugated Boxes	18

In general, the group dynamics of each focus group was positive and collegial. Participants in the job-seeker focus groups were also supportive of each other, especially during the discussion of career aspirations. While all participants were engaged throughout each focus group topic, consensus about ideas and opinions varied. These will be noted in the findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Dr. Tate facilitated all focus groups, which lasted 90 minutes. Using the appropriate discussion guide, she elicited participants' goals, predictions, reflections, and judgments related to workforce development. Table 2 presents the objective and key questions. Job seekers' discussions centered on the challenges and support they have experienced while seeking meaningful employment. (See Appendix A for detailed discussion guide.) The small businesses discussed challenges to hiring and retaining qualified entry-level employees. (See Appendix B for detailed discussion guide.)

Table 2 | Objective and Key Discussion Topics for Focus Groups

Job Seekers	Small Businesses
Objective: To gain insight into the barriers (perceived and actual) to meaningful employment in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:	**Objective**: To gain insight into the perceptions of small businesses about the applicant pool for potential employees in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:
- participants' definitions and expectations about meaningful employment - existing and desired supports while seeking meaningful employment - perceptions of barriers to meaningful employment.	- requisite qualifications and characteristics for entry-level positions - perceived and actual challenges to attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees
Key Questions:	**Key Questions:**
- What is your ideal job? - What steps does it take for you to achieve your ideal job? - How are you supported to achieve your ideal job? - What challenges might most people face when seeking their ideal job?	- What is your ideal candidate for an entry-level position? - What are the challenges to hiring qualified employees that meet the needs of your business?

A variety of elicitation techniques were used to encourage full participation. For the ideal job and candidate discussion, participants were prompted to write ideas on handouts prior to sharing aloud. Some questions requested participants to display numerical ratings (1-5) of confidence and difficulty, which were documented by the note taker. Participants ranked a set of challenges by voting for the top three with sticker dots. During the discussions related to supports and challenges, the facilitator listed participants' ideas on chart paper. Throughout the focus group, the facilitator checked for consensus, restated comments for clarification, and prompted participants to elaborate their responses.

All focus groups were audio recorded, with participants' consent, and transcribed for content. The note taker wrote notes during each group and the facilitator wrote reflections following each group to capture any immediate insights. The written responses on the handouts were coded into categories and characterized into themes. Chart paper notes were reviewed and characterized into themes. The mean and standard deviation were calculated for each set of confidence and difficulty ratings. Transcripts, written notes, and reflections were used to fill in missing information, provide additional context, and inform interpretation.

In this research brief, a summary of findings for the job seekers and small business community will be presented. The community and campus groups will be discussed separately. Next, the results for the small business community will be presented. This brief concludes with a review of key findings and a set of recommendations for workforce development that are relevant to job seekers and the small business community.

JOB SEEKERS | COMMUNITY

Defining Meaningful Work

To establish a working definition of meaningful work, the initial conversation elicited participants' ideas about their ideal jobs. Each participant shared one to two ideal jobs they wished to pursue. Then, they shared how working that ideal job would affect their lives.

Ideal Jobs

Twenty participants in the community groups envisioned meaningful work across a variety of occupations and careers.

- Thirty-nine ideal jobs were reported.
    - Eleven (28.2%) ideal jobs related to medical field. Eight (20.5%) were nursing positions, including: certified nursing assistant (CNA), licensed practical nurse (LPN), and registered nurse (RN). Medical assistant, surgical technician, and anesthesiologist were also mentioned.

    - Four (10.3%) related to the culinary field (e.g., chef).

    - Two (5.1%) related to the mechanics field (e.g., diesel mechanic).

    - Two (5.1%) related to the computing field (e.g., computer technician).

- Occupations that were reported only once included: welder, real estate agent, electrician, mechanical engineer, lawyer, mass communications occupation, heavy equipment operator, human resources manager, and truck driver.

- Several participants reported pairs of jobs or careers that differed greatly from each other, such as: nurse and computer technician, diesel mechanic and lawyer, electrician and culinary artist, cosmetologist and medical assistant, and nurse and chef.

- Seven (35%) jobs seekers reported the desire to business owners. Their businesses are related to their ideal jobs and included: cleaning service, computer repair shop, real estate agency, hair salon, mechanic shop, and restaurant.

It is important to note that most participants discuss their ideal jobs as a *first career*. Few shared that they experienced a substantial career prior to his or her current pursuits.

Reasons for Pursuing Ideal Jobs

Twenty participants in the community focus groups shared 35 reasons for pursuing their ideal job.

- Eight (22.9%) related to performing the activities of the job.
- Seven (20%) related to learning more or interacting with people.
- Seven (20%) related to helping people.
- Seven (20%) related to owning a business, creating jobs, or being their own boss.
- Six (15.4%) related to providing for self and their family, or to making money.

Path to Ideal Job

Participants shared three to five steps toward their ideal jobs, which generated a total of 62 milestones related to education, work experience, business ownership, personal development, and job-seeking skills.

- Forty-one (66.1%) focused on education-related activities such as enrolling in or graduating from school. All first steps centered on achieving their GED certificate.

- Eleven (17.7%) related to work experience (e.g., internship) and six (9.7%) related to business ownership (e.g., business license or raise startup funds). These milestones emerged in participants' third steps.

- Four (6.5%) related to personal development (e.g., focus and discipline).

- One (1.6%) related to job-seeking skills (e.g., interviewing skills).

Confidence to Achieve Ideal Job

Participants rated their confidence on a scale of one (not confident) to five (very confident) about the likelihood that they will achieve (a) their ideal job in one, three, or five years and (b) the first, second, and third steps on the path to their ideal job.

In each focus group, participants displayed a card with the number that reflected their confidence ratings. The facilitator quickly reviewed each participant's rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants' reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

When rating more distant points in the future, participants showed increased confidence that they will achieve their ideal job. (See Table 3.)

Table 3 | Confidence Ratings for Achieving Ideal Job in 1, 3, and 5 years

	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5
Mean (Standard Deviation)	2.84 (1.42)	4.47 (0.84)	4.95 (0.23)

- On average, participants indicated higher confidence levels when rating the likelihood of their future achievements by the year-three point compared to their ratings at the year-one point. This may be due to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first step. Nineteen (95%) participants reported their first step as attaining a GED certificate.

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by the year-five point, nineteen (95%) participants displayed a confidence rating of five. When asked, several participants reported that sufficient time would have elapsed in order for them to achieve their ideal job. There seemed to be a general consensus for this reasoning among group participants.

When rating the likelihood for future achievement of the first, second, and third steps of the path toward their ideal job, eighteen (90%) participants reported a high level of confidence across all steps. While participants articulated chronological paths, the emphasis on milestones, rather than time, seemed to shift their perceptions of confidence.

Throughout the discussion about seeking meaningful work, several participants were asked to explain their confidence ratings. These participants reported their confidence to be (a) bolstered by self-

confidence in abilities or a sheer determination to achieve or (b) tempered by time due to uncertainty of family responsibilities, inability to predict one's situation, or possible switch in job or career choices.

Supporting the Path to Meaningful Work

As a whole group, participants generated a list of persons and programs that have the potential to support job seekers like them. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately.

When asked "Who supports you on the path toward your ideal job?" participants in both community groups quickly reached consensus on the list of supports in their social network. As the discussion extended to programmatic supports, both community groups were less generative. To elaborate the discussion, the facilitator prompted participants to consider specific types of programs, such as those that help with job-seeking skills (e.g., interviewing skills). Often, one or two participants were the primary contributors. Other participants would add details or note that this was new information to them. Given these group dynamics, the findings related to programmatic supports represent a full listing of existing services generated during the discussions.

Existing Supports

Most participants shared that they seek support within their social networks:

- **Family and Friends**: Many participants reported parents, spouses, siblings, and children and grandchildren as supporters. One participant mentioned that family might help with childcare. Several participants explained that their children or grandchildren might also help them with schoolwork. A few participants shared that family members encourage them stay focused on their goals.

- **Classmates**: Several participants reported that observing their classmates helped them stay motivated to achieve their goals.

- **Teachers**: Several participants reported that their teachers offer encouragement (e.g., "don't give up") and motivation, and increase their confidence. One participant reported that past teachers have maintained a relationship with them to see how she has progressed toward her education and career goals.

- Other potential supports reported included coworkers, neighbors, and the faith community.

A wide range of community programs offer support:

- Community-based or nonprofit programs offer a set of services that include social, educational, and fiscal supports.

    o **Union Mission** refers residents to social programs and donations; counseling to help people find grants for school or housing.

    o The **St. Joseph's Candler St. Mary's Community Center** hosts eye clinic and provides support with filing taxes.

    o The **Moses Jackson Advancement Center** offers support with filing taxes and free classes to earn commercial driver's license (CDL).

    o The **Housing Authority of Savannah** offers computer classes and home ownership guidance.

- Several participants identified local supports for GED classes and job-related classes and training.

  o In addition to GED classes offered at community sites, such as **Housing Authority of Savannah and Moses Jackson Advancement Center**, job seekers can also receive academic support from the **Royce Learning Center**.

  o Some job seekers can receive assistance from the **Job Corps**, a residential program that simultaneously offers GED classes and job training for a trade.

  o Beginning in January, **St. Mary's Community Center** will host Accelerating Opportunity Patient Care Technician program.

- When prompted, a few participants shared several job-seeking resources to support the journey toward their ideal job.

  o The **Department of Labor** coordinates one-on-one interviews with applicants and potential employees, offers classes, and provides referrals to jobs.

  o **Goodwill** (on Sallie Mood Drive) teaches job skills to persons with disabilities.

  o The **St. Joseph's/Candler St. Mary's Community Center** offers job placement or career counseling.

  o **Step Up** provides assistance with writing cover letters and resumes and conducts mock interviews.

  o Other resources that participants mentioned included job fairs, temporary or staffing agencies, and on-the-job training opportunities.

- Aspiring business owners cited the **Small Business Administration** as a support because it helps new business owners write proposals, apply for loans, and obtain advice for starting a new business.

Desired Supports

Many participants expressed that they need the most support with completing their GED certificate and finding work experiences. Some wanted more job-seeking supports, such as assistance writing a resume.

Given the diversity of reported ideal jobs, several participants desired more job training opportunities in a variety of fields. A few participants shared that they would like to see more opportunities like Savannah Technical College's Accelerating Opportunity Patient Care Technician program. One participant reported that this program is currently limited to thirty students; she desired more openings.

Finally, several participants requested fiscal supports as they work toward achieving their ideal jobs. Some described financial aid or scholarships as possible supports while they pursue a GED certificate or future degrees. As well, money for childcare, gas, and computers were mentioned as needed supports. In one community group, there was a disagreement between two participants about whether individuals should receive financial assistance versus "make it on their own". Generally, most participants agreed that fiscal supports would benefit them.

Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work

Research for this larger study included a literature review that revealed multiple barriers to meaningful employment at the national, regional, and state levels. During the focus groups, each participant identified the top three barriers (referred to as challenges) that most people might face when seeking meaningful employment. (See Table 4 for rankings.)

As a group, participants discussed some of the top challenges. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately. The reported themes describe the full discussion. Consensus among participants is noted where applicable.

Note: One community group discussed discrimination and the other community group discussed criminal background and education and training.

Key Challenges

Education and Training

- **Importance to Employers**: There was consensus among participants that education and training are most important to employers. One participant emphasized this point by stating, "if I flip burgers, I have to have a GED or high school diploma."

- **Costs**: Some participants mentioned that education and training could be challenging due to costs.

- **Different Job Requirements**: A few participants discussed how job requirements have changed for older job seekers. They explained how hotels prefer staff, including front desk receptionists, to be bilingual. Also, for job seekers who attended high school "a while ago", some classes or skills that are required now were not even offered then, such as foreign language.

- **"It's Who You Know":** Several participants explained that in the past, employers would give a person a chance even if he or she did not have the required education. These employers may have believed the he or she would "train well". Participants also explained that if an employer knew the person's family, they would "vouch" or speak up for them. There was consensus among the participants in the focus group that these sentiments were valid.

Criminal Background

- **Limited Opportunity for a Second Chance**: With regard to criminal background, there was consensus that a person's "mistake" or criminal conviction follows them for the rest of his or her life. Many participants agreed that being a convicted felon could prevent him or her from getting a job.
  - Several participants explained that a person with a criminal background might receive a second chance, if:
    - sufficient time passes. For example, a DUI can hold you back from obtaining a commercial driver's license (CDL). You need to have a clean record for 5 - 7 years.
    - his or her record has been expunged as part of a first offender's program. This costs money and takes times.

- **It's cyclical:** Several participants explained that a person is unable to find employment after "serving their time", and his or her chances of returning to prison increases.

- **Few Employers Hire**: Most participants were unsure about which companies hire applicants with a criminal background.

- **Uneven Application of Policy**: A few participants have observed that companies' hiring policies related to criminal background are not applied across the board for everyone. For example, if the hiring manager knows the person with a criminal record, then they might look past it.

Table 4 | Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work (ranked)

Challenges*	Number of votes (#)	Percentage of votes (%)
Education and Training	9	17.0%
Child care	8	15.1%
Discrimination	8	15.1%
Health	6	11.3%
Criminal background	5	9.4%
Transportation	5	9.4%
Home life	5	9.4%
Disability	3	5.7%
Drug use	3	5.6%
Job-seeking Costs	1	1.9%

*Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Discrimination

- **Multiple Forms**: Most participants agreed that some people who hire discriminate against race or religion. Some participants explained that the discrimination is not just limited to African Americans, and that some hiring managers also discriminate against appearance (e.g., tattoos, hair).

- **Multiple Sources**: Participants also reported that in addition to discrimination by managers or supervisors, coworkers also discriminate. This could be observed in conversations or in the exclusion of certain coworkers from conversations.

- **Multiple Points**: Several participants reported that they experienced discrimination prior to getting the job and while they were employed. One participant explained that a person might be passed over for a promotion due to discrimination. Several participants agreed discrimination increases as they move up professionally.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants rated the difficulty associated with overcoming challenges on a scale of one (not difficult) to five (very difficult). The rated challenges included education and training, criminal background, and discrimination. According to participants' ratings, they perceive these challenges as quite difficult to overcome when seeking meaningful employment. For example, a participant shared that a person's difficulty in navigating life contributed to the challenges related to education and training. Given the themes discussed earlier, the challenge of criminal background seemed insurmountable to participants.

Finally, to reduce job seekers' perceptions of difficulty related to discrimination, employers must take responsibility for maintaining a fair and equitable workplace free from discrimination.

Table 5 | Difficulty Ratings for Overcoming Challenges to Meaningful Work

	Education and Training (N=7)	Criminal Background (N=7)	Discrimination (N=11)
Mean (Standard Deviation)	4.00 (1.00)	4.71 (0.49)	4.18 (1.25)

Conclusions

Participants in the community focus groups described meaningful work in diverse ways with respect to career aspirations (e.g., nurse or business owner) and reasons for career pursuits (e.g., do something they enjoy or help people). They articulated a clear, chronological path toward their ideal job. Most emphasized educational milestones during the early steps (e.g., obtain GED certificate or enroll in college) with increased mention of milestones related to work experience or business startup (e.g., secure funding) in later steps.

For each step in their articulated path, participants maintained a high level of confidence that they will achieve success. When thinking about their path over one, three, and five years, they tempered their confidence early because of uncertainty due to family responsibilities, potential life changes, or the significance of accomplishing their first educational milestone (e.g., attain GED certificate). When asked to consider the likelihood of achieving their ideal job in three years, participants increased their confidence. They maintained this high confidence when considering the likelihood that they will achieve their ideal job or career by year five. This increased confidence might be due to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first educational milestone or they might find it difficult to imagine future challenges.

Most participants in the community focus groups have some awareness of, have utilized, or plan to utilize educational, social, and financial supports beyond their personal networks. They desire the most support in completing their GED certificate and securing work experiences. Participants also requested financial assistance in the form of grants, scholarships, or stipends for childcare and transportation.

Finally, education and training, criminal background, and discrimination emerged as the top three barriers to meaningful employment among this group of participants. While these participants remain confident and determined to achieve their ideal jobs, their difficulty ratings emphasized that these challenges represent significant barriers to meaningful employment.

JOB SEEKERS | CAMPUS

Defining Meaningful Work

To establish a working definition of meaningful work, the initial conversation elicited participants' ideas about their ideal jobs. Each participant shared one to two ideal jobs they wished to pursue. Then, they shared how working that ideal job would affect their lives.

Ideal Jobs

The campus group was comprised of two GED classes that included participants enrolled in either the Accelerating Opportunity welding class or the Fast Track program. Noteworthy differences between these groups emerged with respect to the ideal jobs discussion only. Therefore, the findings will be presented separately. The supports and challenges sections will present findings across both classes.

Welding Job Seekers

Twelve participants in the welding class envisioned meaningful work as a variety of occupations and careers.

Twenty-three ideal jobs were reported.

- Eleven participants (91.7%) listed welder as their ideal job.

    o When asked, seven participants (58.3%) reported that they decided to become a welder before they heard about this Accelerated Opportunity program. A few participants considered this job as a means to earn money while pursuing other interests.

- Two jobs (8.7%) related to business ownership.

- Two jobs (8.7%) related to the aircraft technician field.

- Two jobs (8.7%) related to driving trucks.

- Occupations that were reported only once included nurse, chef, computer technician, and pilot.

Fast Track Job Seekers

Eleven Fast Track participants envisioned meaningful work across a variety of occupations and careers.

Nineteen ideal jobs were reported.

- Three (15.8%) related to the mechanics field (e.g., diesel mechanic).

- Three (15.8%) related to business ownership, in particular, a restaurant, family business, and consulting company.

- Two (10.5%) related to the aerospace field (e.g., aircraft technician).

- Two (10.5%) related to the medical field, in particular, medical assistant and patient care technician.

- Occupations that were reported only once included cosmetologist, deputy sheriff, firefighter, professional musician, sports coach, youth counselor, arson investigator, and air and heating technician.

- Several participants shared pairs of jobs that differed greatly from each other, such as beautician and mechanic, medical assistant and aircraft technician, and patient care technician and deputy sheriff.

Reasons for Pursuing Ideal Jobs

Welding Job Seekers

Welding participants shared 30 reasons for pursuing their ideal job.

- Eighteen (60%) related to providing for self and their family, or to making money. Participants considered welding an in-demand, secure field where you earn a high salary.

- Four (13.3%) related to travel.

- Three (10%) related to performing the activities of the job. The only job-specific reasons provided related to the culinary arts and real estate jobs. None of the reasons provided for welding described any related skills or services (e.g., put things together, build things, or work with metal).

- Two (6.7%) related to career advancement.

- Two (6.7%) related to a desire to learn more.

- One (3.3%) related to owning a business and creating jobs.

Fast Track Job Seekers

Fast Track participants shared 24 reasons for pursuing their ideal job.

- Seven (29.2%) related to helping people.

- Five (20.1%) related to providing for self and their family, or to making money.

- Four (16.7%) related to career advancement.

- Three (12.5%) related to performing the activities of the job.

- Three (12.5%) related to learning more or interacting with people.

- Two (8.3%) related to owning a business, creating jobs, or being their own boss.

Path to Ideal Job

Participants shared three to five steps toward their ideal jobs related to education, work experience, business ownership, personal development, and job-seeking skills.

Welding Job Seekers

Welding participants generated a total of 38 milestones.

- Twenty (52.6%) focused on education-related activities such as enrolling in or graduating from school. All first steps centered on achieving their GED certificate. No education milestones appeared in the later steps.

- Ten (26.3%) related to work experience and four (10.5%) related to job-seeking skills (e.g., interview skills). These milestones appeared in some participants' second steps and most participants' third steps.

- Two (5.3%) related to personal development (e.g., focus and discipline).

- One (2.6%) related to business ownership.

Fast Track Job Seekers

Fast Track participants generated a total of 33 milestones.

- Twenty-two (66.7%) focused on education-related activities such as enrolling in or graduating from school. All first steps centered on achieving their GED certificate.

- Three (9.1%) related to work experience and five (15.2%) related to business ownership such as secure an internship, achieve a business license, or raise startup funds.

- Three (9.1%) related to personal development (e.g., focus and discipline).

- Zero related to job-seeking skills.

Confidence to Achieve Ideal Job

Participants rated their confidence on a scale of one (not confident) to five (very confident) about the likelihood that they will achieve (a) their ideal job in one, three, or five years and (b) the first, second, and third steps on the path to their ideal job.

In each focus group, participants displayed a card with the number that reflected their confidence ratings. The facilitator quickly reviewed each participant's rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants' reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

When rating more distant points in the future, participants showed increased confidence that they will achieve their ideal job. (See Table 6.)

Table 6 | Confidence Ratings for Achieving Ideal Job in 1, 3, and 5 years

		Year 1	Year 3	Year 5
Job Seekers	**N**	**Mean (Standard Deviation)**		
Welding	11	3.36 (1.21)	4.55 (0.69)	4.64 (0.67)
Fast Track	10	4.10 (1.45)	4.60 (0.70)	4.80 (0.42)

Welding Job Seekers

- On average, participants indicated higher confidence levels when rating the likelihood of their future achievements by the year-three point compared to their ratings at the year-one point. This may be due to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first step. Twelve participants (100%) reported their first step as attaining a GED certificate or graduating from school.

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by year one, five participants (45.5%) reported high confidence. This may be due to the length of the Accelerating Opportunity program, about nine months. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, three participants predicted that they would be working within one year.

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by the year-five point, eight participants (72.7%) displayed a confidence rating of five. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, two participants predicted that they would have changed jobs within five years.

Twelve participants rated the likelihood for future achievement of the first, second, and third steps of the path toward their ideal job. Ten participants (83.3%) reported a high level of confidence across all steps or gradually increased their confidence ratings for each subsequent milestone.

Throughout the discussion about seeking meaningful work, several participants were asked to explain their confidence ratings. These participants reported their confidence to be bolstered by (a) self-confidence in abilities or a sheer determination to achieve; (b) expressed support from classmates, teachers, and family; and (c) expectations that they will return to a previous job or secure a job through networking connections. They also reported their confidence to be tempered by time due to a hesitance to, "put all their eggs in one basket", the inability to predict the economy or workforce demand, or possible changes in job or career choices.

Fast Track Job Seekers

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by year one, participants reported, on average, higher confidence ratings than other participants in the community groups and the welding campus group. Similar to the other groups, the majority of participants identified their first milestone as attaining a GED certificate. The expectation that the Fast Track participants will attain their GED within three to six months might explain these differences in reported confidence levels. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, several participants reported that their next step, earning a certificate or a degree in their desired field, could be achieved within one year.

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by year five, eight participants (80%) reported a confidence rating of five. There seemed to be a general agreement among participants that five years was enough time to achieve their ideal job. When prompted to explain her confidence rating, one participant predicted that five years would be sufficient time to achieve a job where she can earn enough money to save for business start-up costs.

All participants reported a high level of confidence across at least two steps when rating the likelihood for future achievement of the first, second, and third steps in their articulated path toward their ideal job. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, a couple of participants expressed some concerns about not achieving their intermediate steps because of a physical condition or a past experience. The facilitator followed up with them after they displayed high confidence ratings for the likelihood that they would achieve the third step articulated in their path. Both explained that they were more confident about achieving their third steps because they would have overcome challenges earlier in their path.

Throughout the discussion about seeking meaningful work, several participants were asked to explain their confidence ratings. These participants reported their confidence to be bolstered by self-confidence in abilities, or a sheer determination to achieve, or tempered by time, due to difficulty in securing startup funds (potential business owners), health conditions, inability to predict if they will secure meaningful employment, or possible change in job or career choice.

Supporting the Path to Meaningful Work

As a whole group, participants generated a list of persons and programs that have the potential to support job seekers like them. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately.

Initially, participants were asked to identify people in their social networks who have supported them as they seek their ideal jobs. In both campus groups, participants quickly reached consensus on the list of supports in their social network. As the discussion extended to programmatic supports, both campus groups were less generative with respect to the (a) prior discussion about social networks and (b) participants in the community groups. To elaborate the discussion, the facilitator prompted participants to consider specific types of programs, such as those that coordinate networking opportunities with employers. Often, one or two participants were the primary contributors. Other participants would (a) add details, (b) note that this was new information to them, or (c) inquire about how to learn more about the shared opportunities. Given these group dynamics, the findings related to programmatic supports represent a full listing of existing services generated during the discussions.

Existing Supports

Most participants shared that they seek support within their social networks:

- *Family and Friends*: Most participants generated a list of personal supports that included: parents, spouses, siblings, children and grandchildren, and significant others. When asked to explain how family and friends offer support, one participant shared that her family might help out financially by providing money for transportation (e.g., bus pass). Several participants also shared that family members encourage them to stay focused on their goals. A few participants also mentioned that their children or grandchildren help them with schoolwork.

- *Classmates*: Several participants considered their classmates a source of information. There was shared appreciation among the welding participants that they will remain a cohort for the duration of the Accelerating Opportunity program.

- *Teachers*: There was consensus among participants that their teachers were source of encouragement and motivation, and helped students to remain confident. A few welding participants shared that they expected their teachers to help them with the job search process. Specifically, their GED teacher would help to hone their interview skills and their welding instructor would provide referrals to potential employers.

- *School Administration*: A few participants mentioned that campus counselors offered assistance with the job search process.

A wide range of programs offer support:

- Several agencies offer a set of services that include: social, educational, and fiscal supports.

    o The **Housing Authority of Savannah** provides housing assistance and administrative support to help people who have difficulty paying their utility bills.

    o The **Department of Labor** provides money to supplement living expenses.

    o The **Department of Family and Children Services** offers SNAP benefits to help with living expenses.

- Several participants identified local supports for GED classes and job-related classes and training.

    o Most participants agreed that **United Way** was a source of support. This agency funds the Accelerating Opportunity welding program, which includes free tuition for students, clothing, and equipment. This program also provides referrals for jobs.

    o The **Department of Labor** provides training for careers (e.g., electrician and truck driver).

    o The **Housing Authority of Savannah** also offers GED classes.

    o Some employers pay for education or professional development classes.

- When prompted, some of the participants shared a few job-seeking resources to support the journey toward their ideal job.

    o Participants mentioned that there was a job interview program on campus, but they were unsure about where it was located.

    o The **Army Career and Alumni Program** offers support, such as computer classes and learning to write a resume. The program also connects job seekers with employers.

    o Participants also mentioned job fairs.

Desired Supports

During the discussion about supports, many participants expressed that they were unfamiliar with programs that can provide support them as they seek meaningful employment. As reported earlier, one or two participants served as the primary contributors to the programmatic supports discussion. A few other participants asked about how they could learn about the programs mentioned.

Most participants indicated that they needed the most support with obtaining their education (e.g., GED certificate and future degrees). Several participants also desired assistance with (a) securing steady employment so they can save money, (b) business startup activities (e.g., networking and obtaining funding), and (c) personal development. Similar to a discussion in one of the community groups, two participants in one of the campus groups disagreed with each other about whether it was appropriate to receive various forms of public assistance (e.g., unemployment benefits). One participant insisted that, "You have to make your own. You can't expect everybody to do it for you. You have to really ask for help if you need it." Other than this dissent, there was consensus among participants that fiscal supports, such as money for childcare and transportation expenses, would benefit them as they work toward achieving their ideal jobs.

Challenges to Meaningful Work

Research for this larger study included a literature review that revealed multiple barriers to meaningful employment at the national, regional, and state levels. During the focus groups, each participant identified the top three barriers (referred to as challenges) that most people might face when seeking meaningful employment. (See Table 7 for rankings.)

As a group, participants discussed some of the top challenges. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately. The reported themes describe the full discussion. Consensus among participants is noted where applicable.

Note: One campus group discussed criminal background, drug use, and transportation. The other campus group discussed education and training and criminal background.

Table 7 | Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work (ranked)

Challenges[*]	Number (#) of votes	Percentage (%) of votes
Criminal background	18	26.9%
Transportation	12	17.9%
Education or Training	11	16.4%
Drug use	9	13.4%
Child care	6	9.0%
Discrimination	5	7.5%
Health	3	4.5%
Home life	2	3.0%
Disability	1	1.5%
Job-seeking Costs	0	0%

[*]Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Key Challenges

Education and Training

- **Important to Employers**: Participants generally agreed that education and training are most important to employers. Some participants emphasized this point with the following sentiments:

  o Without certain education and training, it limits the position a person can obtain. He or she will get "low balled."

  o A person needs a certificate to move up into management. This applies even if the candidate has experience.

- **Costs**: There was consensus among participants that education and training can be challenging due to costs.

  o A few participants explained that sometimes the initial investment is not proportional to the earnings received. For example:

    ▪ To become an armed security guard, a person needs multiple certifications, such as SLED - a concealed weapons training course. This can cost up to $300.00. If hired, a person might earn $9 - $10 an hour.

  o Several participants shared their beliefs that companies need to offer support for employees to continue their education and training. Relevant supports may include money, time off, or on-the-job training. These participants also shared two examples of companies that pay for employees to attend school and offer an in-house training program.

o One participant raised the issue that some companies do not share available advancement opportunities with all employees. For example, the human resources representative fails to inform employees that the company will pay them to take a class that will help them move up the career ladder.

- **Different Job Application Requirements:** Several participants explained that job applicants now have to apply for positions online. These participants added that the application process requires more than in the past, such as behavioral (e.g., what would you do in a certain situation?) and skills (e.g., math) testing.

Criminal Background

- **Limited Opportunity for a Second Chance:** With regard to criminal background, there was general consensus that a person's criminal background follows them for the rest of his or her life. Several participants shared that federal employers can look back 5, 10, even 15 years ago when conducting a criminal background check, and private employers can look at a person's "whole" life.

  o A few participants mentioned that they considered the criminal record criterion for hiring to be discriminatory since it offers "no second chance". These participants also spoke about how some applicants might be perceived as criminals due to stereotypes about appearance.

- **More than a workforce problem:** Participants agreed that many people have a criminal record. Several participants mentioned that a criminal record does more than prevent a person from getting a job. It can keep them from voting and living in certain locations.

- **Few Employers Hire:** In both campus groups, many participants were very engaged and eager to share their sentiments about employers' hiring policies related to criminal background. Given the nature of this discussion, participants were more likely to add to the comments rather than offer any dissent.

  o Most participants expressed uncertainty about which companies hire applicants with a criminal background.

  o A few participants reported the existence of an online list of Georgia employers who hire applicants with a criminal background.

  o Several participants emphasized the point that employers who hire applicants with a criminal background only offer "dead end jobs". "All of the fast restaurants require you to have a GED or high school diploma and a clean criminal background check or you will not get hired."

  o Multiple participants discussed how companies use temporary staffing services to hire applicants with a criminal record, which offer no benefits and "contract" of employment.

  o Some participants also explained that the barrier to employment varies based on the charge (e.g., violent charge, drugs). For example, an employer might not hire a person with a violent charge. A few participants agreed that this condition was reasonable for certain jobs, such as working with children.

  o A few participants shared that some companies hire applicants with a criminal background because they might receive a tax cut or incentive.

      o   There was some consensus among participants that if a person with a criminal record is hired, "they have to work harder" or "prove him- or herself."

Drug Use

In this discussion, participants generally agreed that the impact of drug use in the workplace, such as absenteeism and risks to safety. Several participants recognized that a company makes an investment when they hire an employee and that drug use increases a company's liability. When asked about the companies that do not test for drug use, a few participants responded that those companies usually offer "dead end jobs" that have a person "living from paycheck to paycheck" (e.g., fast food or lawn care).

Transportation

There was general consensus among participants that someone without a driver's license and a reliable vehicle is challenged to get to and from work. Also, for those who use public transportation, the Chatham Area Transit is adequate in Savannah despite the longer wait time in recent years. For those who live outside of Savannah (e.g., Pooler and Rincon), public transportation is not an option.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants rated the difficulty associated with overcoming challenges on a scale of one (not difficult) to five (very difficult). The rated challenges included education and training, criminal background, transportation, and drug use. According to participants, drug use and transportation are less difficult to overcome than criminal background and limited education and training. Participants generally agreed that supports, such as family members willing to share a car or friends who offer rides, can ease transportation challenges, although some participants offered determination and a "no excuses" attitude as the way to lessen the impact of this challenge on their lives.

Overwhelmingly, participants rated criminal background as highly difficult to overcome due to employers' perceptions, preconceived notions, and lack of comfort with people who have a criminal background. Still, many participants' suggested that perseverance and determination made it possible to succeed despite this barrier.

Table 8 | Difficulty Ratings for Overcoming Challenges to Meaningful Work

	Criminal Background (N=12)	Drug Use (N=12)	Transportation (N=12)	Education and Training (N=11)
Mean (Standard Deviation)	4.57(0.90)	2.50 (1.31)	2.83 (1.40)	3.65 (0.92)

Conclusions

Participants in the campus focus groups were enrolled in the Accelerating Opportunity welding and the Fast Track GED programs. Differences among program participants emerged as they described meaningful work with respect to career aspirations (e.g., welder, aircraft technician, and business owner) and reasons for career pursuits (e.g., provide for their families, help people, and travel). As expected, most participants in the Accelerated Opportunity program listed welding as an ideal job because they believed the occupation to be in demand and pay a high salary. Almost half of the participants considered working as a welder after they learned about the Accelerated Opportunity welding program. The Fast Track participants identified a variety of ideal jobs ranging from firefighter to

patient technician to diesel mechanic. In addition to providing for family, participants cited helping people and career advancement as reasons for seeking their ideal jobs.

Both groups articulated clear, chronological paths toward their ideal jobs. For the earlier steps, most participants emphasized educational milestones (e.g., obtain GED certificate or enroll in college) with increased mention of work experience or business startup (e.g. secure funding) milestones in later steps. The welding participants began to include milestones related to work experience at step two, earlier than participants in the Fast Track and community groups. Welding participants simultaneously pursue their GED certificate and welding certificate or degree. Enrollment in career-related classes might heighten the immediacy of employment for the welding participants and encourage them to prioritize working experiences earlier in their paths toward their ideal jobs.

For each step in their articulated path, participants in both programs maintained a high level of confidence that they will achieve success. When considering the likelihood for achievement of their ideal job in one, three, and five years, they tempered their confidence early because of uncertainty due to an unpredictable economy or workforce demand, potential life changes, or the significance of accomplishing their first educational milestone. When asked to consider the likelihood of achieving their ideal job in three years, participants increased their confidence. They maintained this high level of confidence when considering the likelihood that they will achieve their ideal job or career by year five. Similar to the community groups, this increased confidence might be attributed to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first educational milestone or they might find it difficult to imagine future challenges. Additionally, participants in the campus groups may also consider themselves further along on their articulated career path, given the expectation that they will achieve their GED certificate in three to six months or their current enrollment in job-related classes. These current and soon-to-be accomplished milestones might have motivated higher levels of confidence when predicting success.

Both groups of participants demonstrated some awareness about educational, social, and financial supports beyond their personal networks. With prompting, the participants were able to brainstorm a notable list of programmatic supports. However, many participants did inquire several times about how they were supposed to know this information. In addition, both groups of participants desired the most support for completing their GED and finding work experiences. Financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, or stipends for childcare and transportation was also requested.

Finally, participants ranked education and training, criminal background, drug use, and transportation as the top challenges most people might face when pursuing their ideal jobs. While participants remained confident and determined to achieve, their high ratings of difficulty for criminal background and education and training underscored these challenges as significant barriers to meaningful employment.

SMALL BUSINESSES

Ideal Candidates for Entry-level Positions

To better understand the employment needs of the small business community, participants identified entry-level positions within their business. The positions cited included construction laborer, administrative support (e.g., clerical or reception), home caregiver, plant worker, medical assistant, production technician (remediation), general service technician (auto repair), sales associate, and networking technician.

In addition, participants reflected upon their *ideal* candidate for the position and answered the following questions:

- What skills and experiences should he or she have? Why?

- What characteristics does he or she have that indicates his or her potential to advance within your organization?

As each participant shared his or her responses to the above questions, the facilitator prompted for clarification or elaboration, if necessary. While some participants offered comment on shared ideas, the round-robin style of this initial discussion engendered a generally equitable conversation.

Skills and Experiences

In sum, participants generated 72 examples of skills and experiences to illustrate the ideal candidate for their businesses. (See Table 9.) Regardless of the position or industry, "soft skills" were mentioned more often than specific job-related education, skills or experiences. The key points are summarized:

- ***Personality qualities****:* Almost all participants conflated characteristics with skills and experiences. In essence, most participants desired employees who are dependable, respectful, personally accountable, and maintain a positive attitude. There was consensus among participants that employees who possess these qualities, in addition to existing or future job-related skills, are good for business. Specifically, these employees benefit business operations (e.g., complete assigned job responsibilities), enhance customer relations (e.g., help clients to feel welcome), and support teamwork (e.g., communicate challenges in a timely manner).

- ***Communication***: Participants generally agreed that job seekers must speak correct English, listen well, and adapt communications to different audiences (e.g., across generations and non-technical customers). Several participants also emphasized the ability to write in a clear and cohesive manner for a range of business communications from emails and letters to proposals. Also, one participant mentioned that writing deficiencies were not limited to entry-level employees, but have also been observed among professional staff members.

- ***Education and experience***: While "soft skills" were prioritized, several participants mentioned that they still expected competence in reading and math. A few participants wanted applicants to have a completed course of study (e.g., diploma, certificate or degree) in order to demonstrate follow-through and a steady work history, and to show evidence of commitment and attendance. It is important to note that many participants agreed they could, and are willing to train job-specific skills.

- ***Problem solving or task management***: Most participants agreed that entry-level employees need to learn quickly, follow instructions, work independently, and use common sense to make decisions and figure out solutions. Several participants, particularly those who described

administrative positions, required the additional abilities. These entry-level employees must be apt to manage multiple tasks while addressing interruptions and adapting to shifting priorities.

Table 9 | Desired Skills and Experiences for Entry-level Positions in Small Businesses

Desired Skills and Experiences *"soft skills" in italics*	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of responses (%)
Personality qualities (e.g., respectful, personable)	16	22.2%
Communication (e.g., use correct grammar)	12	16.7%
Job-related skills and experience (e.g., construction knowledge, 1-2 years experience working on business networks)	9	12.5%
General skills, education, and experience (e.g., math, reading)	7	9.7%
Problem solving and task management skills (e.g., work independently, follow instructions)	6	8.33%
Professionalism (e.g., appearance, drug free)	6	8.33%
Office experience and computer skills	5	6.94%
Teamwork (e.g., ability to work and communicate with a team)	4	5.6%
Understanding the "big picture" (e.g., understanding how one's position affects others)	3	4.2%
Physical activity	2	2.8%
Passion (e.g., enjoy job)	2	2.8%

Characteristics for Advancement within Company

As mentioned above, many participants are willing to invest time and money in the training and development of employees. These participants have identified a set of characteristics that indicate an employee's potential to advance within the organization. When prompted, participants in the small business focus group generated 51 examples. (See Table 10.) The top three categories, personality qualities, communication skills, and problem solving and task management skills, were repeated and have been described in the previous section. Participants' discussion of additional characteristics related to professional advancement are summarized:

- ***Vested interest in company***: Several participants explained that employees with the potential for advancement seek knowledge of the industry, display a sense of pride for the company, and work as if he or she has a vested interest in the company. In addition, some participants shared that employees positioned for advancement also quickly learn the systems and procedures of an organization, complete their tasks in a timely manner, and understand how their position affects others and the success of the company.

- ***Willingness to learn***: There was general agreement among participants that employees must be ambitious and committed to their growth – professionally and personally. Some participants

noted that employees must possess the desire to learn knowledge and skills relevant to the profession, and also identify what is needed for them to progress and advance.

• **Teamwork**: With regard to professional advancement, several participants emphasized that employees must demonstrate their ability to collaborate with other employees. Some discussed the notion of teamwork in two ways: (1) Employees must be able to effectively communicate with colleagues when working together on a project, such as simultaneously performing multiple repairs a vehicle. (2) When working in small-business setting, employees must be willing to "pitch in" where necessary and frequently contribute to the team.

Table 10 | Characteristics that Indicate the Potential to Advance in Small Businesses

Characteristics for Advancement *"soft skills" in italics*	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of Responses (%)
Personality qualities (e.g., integrity, drive)	21	41.2%
Communication (e.g., speak and write clearly)	8	15.7%
Problem solving and task management abilities (e.g., set goals)	7	13.7%
Vested interest in company (e.g., relates to company culture)	4	7.8%
Professionalism (e.g., "be present with no drama")	4	7.8%
Willingness to learn	4	7.8%
Teamwork (e.g., frequent contributions to team)	3	5.9%

Confidence about Hiring Ideal Candidate

After participants shared the experiences, skills, and characteristics desired of their ideal candidate, the facilitator inquired about whether participants have ever hired their ideal candidate. Participants also rated their (a) confidence about their ability to hire an ideal candidate and (b) perceived difficulty associated with hiring an ideal candidate.

Each participant displayed a card with the number that reflected his or her confidence and difficulty ratings. Both rating scales ranged from one (not confident or not difficult) to five (very confident or very difficult). To foster discussion, the facilitator quickly reviewed each participant's rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants' reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

All participants reported to have hired their ideal candidate in the past. On average, participants reported to maintain some confidence (mean: 3.58, standard deviation: 1.00) that they are able to hire their ideal candidate. Many acknowledged that it takes time and a little bit of luck, and that often the ideal candidate approaches them first. Some of the participants who reported lower confidence ratings (a) explained that they have limited time to hire candidates or (b) have "come to terms" with the fact that they will hire an applicant that is less than ideal. A few participants reported that they offer a rigorous training process to close the gap between the skills and experiences they desire and a new employee's existing skills and experiences.

On average, participants perceived the difficulty associated with hiring an ideal candidate as low (mean: 2.25, standard deviation: 1.36). For companies required to hire many employees, participants reported a higher level of difficulty. Most participants hire employees directly or via a human resources representative, but some participants mentioned that they have outsourced their hiring to staffing agencies. These participants shared mixed experiences. For example, the quality of temporary employees seemed to be dependent on the diligence and workload of the staffing recruiter.

Several participants also shared several hiring strategies that have proven successful for their businesses. One participant explained that her company has a strong referral system among current employees. A few participants also described extensive interview processes where applicants (a) interview with several or all team members for at least half a day or (b) participate in a trial work period with current employees for a few hours.

Hiring Challenges

Participants discussed hiring challenges in two ways:

1. **Generated Hiring Challenges**: Participants generated common challenges for new employees in entry-level positions, by writing responses to the prompts: "*My new hire usually struggles to . . .*" and "*My new hire usually needs more . . .*" After the participants posted their written responses on the wall, the facilitator selected a few participants to clarify or elaborate on some of challenges.

2. **Ranked Hiring Challenges**: From a set of research-based challenges that emerged from the literature review for this study, participants ranked the top three hiring challenges for their businesses. In each group, participants discussed two of the top challenges. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately. The reported themes recount the full discussion. Consensus among participants is noted where applicable.

Generated Hiring Challenges

In total, participants generated 32 hiring challenges. (See Table 11.) The discussion of these challenges centered on process and productivity.

- **Process**: Several participants described how new employees struggled to quickly learn the processes and procedures of their organization. Some of these participants explained that these process skills required employees to listen and follow directions, and to recognize the utility of standardized work systems. Participants generally agreed there exists the expectation that the employees will gradually learn these processes, and begin to work independently within a few months of hire.

- **Productivity**: Some participants reported that new employees often struggled to accomplish their work responsibilities in a timely manner. For example, some employees seem to work without regard to "billable" time and the customer's expectation that quality work would be performed in an efficient manner. Also, a few participants mentioned that newer employees seem to be more time-oriented rather than task-oriented (i.e., they consider work done because it is the close of business instead of the completion of a task or project).

Please note that one participant submitted only positive responses related to new employees wanting to work more hours and spend additional time at the office. These were not included in the generated hiring challenges reported in Table 11.

Table 11 | Struggles or Needs among New Employee in Small Businesses (generated)

Struggles or Needs for New Hires	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of responses (%)
Knowledge of "the business" (and their role within)	9	28.1%
Job-related training and skills	5	15.6%
Problem solving and work management abilities	5	15.6%
Personality qualities	5	15.6%
Desire to learn or improve	4	12.5%
Ability to adapt to different environments	2	6.3%
Communication and professionalism	2	6.3%

Ranked Hiring Challenges

In both focus groups, participants ranked education and training and home life as the top two hiring challenges for small businesses. (See Table 12 for rankings.)

Table 12 | Hiring Challenges for Small Businesses (ranked)

Challenges[*]	Number of votes (#)	Percentage of votes (%)
Education or training	9	24.3%
Home life	7	18.9%
Criminal background	5	13.5%
Transportation	5	13.5%
Job-seeking costs	3	8.1%
Child care	3	8.1%
Health	2	5.4%
Drug use	2	5.4%
Discrimination	1	2.7%
Disability	0	0%

[*]Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Education and Training

- ***Education is not enough. More real-world experience is needed****.*

  - Many participants contended that more real world experiences are needed in K-12 and postsecondary education. Specifically, students and future job seekers need more opportunities to collaborate in teams, participate in hands-on activities where they apply what they know and integrate constructive feedback.

  - Participants generally agreed that a certificate or degree alone was not enough for job seekers, and suggested that job seekers participate in training programs that expose them to the day-to-day happenings in the workplace. A few participants also recommended that job seekers would benefit from ongoing practice dealing with customers, working as part of team, and learning to manage and prioritize multiple tasks in a dynamic work environment.

  - When asked, several participants expressed their willingness to offer internships that can help students and job seekers gain real-world work experiences.

- ***Customer service***: A few participants remarked how job seekers need opportunities to develop their client or customer service skills, which were described as an amalgam of communication, psychology, and empathy. One participant explained how job seekers should learn how to "make the customer feel better."

- ***Maturity and Life Experience***: Some participants recommended that job seekers should consider finding a mentor to locate professional and personal development opportunities.

- ***Military Experience***: There was some consensus when one participant shared that she valued the discipline of employees who have served in the military.

- ***It always comes back to "Home Training" and "Soft Skills"****.* Participants generally agreed that, if job seekers have not learned manners and how to follow directions in their home, then the schools needs to teach it. A few participants added that job seekers need experiences that teach ethics and personal responsibility and noted that organizations like Junior Achievement can support this effort. Some participants also emphasized that teachers must be able to set and maintain classroom expectations that reflect societal norms.

Home Life

- ***Home life spills over into the workplace***: Participants agreed that a challenging home life (e.g., financial concerns, drug addicted family members, relationships with spouses, significant others and children, or domestic violence) hindered employees' abilities to maintain focus at work. Several participants provided examples, such as a lack of punctuality and decreased production time. One participant believed that single-parent families contributed to these home life challenges. Another participant shared that there have been recent shootings at workplaces across the state, and offered the opinion that these instances might be related to domestic violence. Also, a few participants discussed how the personal use of social media at work affects employees' moods or emotions and decreases production time. Finally, one participant noted that given these home-life challenges, many employees seem to struggle to "switch hats" or draw boundaries between their work and home lives.

- ***Childcare***: A few participants shared that the lack of quality childcare affects employees at all levels.

- **Payroll Burden**: Some participants mentioned that financial obligations, related to child support or bankruptcy, often involve the garnishing of wages. Payroll "departments" at small business have to shoulder this burden.

- **Financial Literacy**: A few participants described how employees' bring stress about a lack of money (perceived or actual) into the workplace. These participants explained that this challenge is not limited to lower-wage employees, but also affects employees at higher levels due to the mismanagement of earnings (e.g., not saving enough, unnecessary 401k loans).

A Note on Criminal Background and Drug Use

During the ideal candidate discussion, a few participants briefly discussed criminal background and drug use, and emphasized that these were big challenges for them. They noted that company policies and insurance requirements necessitate a clean criminal background and driving record and no drug use for employees. Drug use and background screenings follow employers' initial review for skills and experiences, which can lead to a potential hire being disqualified. Frequently, these requirements are communicated in the job announcements, but applicants who cannot pass the screening pursue the position anyway.

Also, some discussion ensued about the impact of drug use on workforce development in Savannah, Georgia. A participant reported that the local challenges related to drug use and criminal background are greater than the rest of the state. Another participant believed these challenges to be representative of the entire state.

Overcoming Challenges

Eight participants rated their confidence on a scale of one (not confident) to five (very confident) about the ability of their businesses to overcome challenges related to home life and education and training.

With regard to home life, many participants reported a lack of confidence (mean: 2.63, standard deviation: 1.41) about overcoming this challenge. Many considered an employee's home life out of their control. However, several participants expressed that one benefit of being a small business is that they can also invest in the personal development of an employee through setting and meeting goals, fiscal education, or mentoring. This investment can help overcome some aspects of the home life challenge.

Participants reported more confidence (mean: 3.57, standard deviation: 1.04) about overcoming the challenges related to education and training. Many agreed that their companies could fill the gap through training, mentorship, and a company culture of accountability and teamwork.

Conclusions

Participants in the small-business focus groups represented multiple industries and considered a broad range of entry-level positions. However, their discussions converged on several key skills and experiences needed for entry-level employees to thrive in their companies. Participants prioritized "soft skills": (a) personality qualities (e.g., dependability), (b) professionalism (e.g., time management and regular attendance), (c) problem solving and task management skills (e.g., work independently and follow procedures), and (d) communication skills (e.g., correct grammar, write clearly and concisely, and adapt message for different audiences).

General skills, such as reading and math, were desired, but most participants were willing to train entry-level employees in job-specific skills and company procedures. Several participants also articulated that employees should demonstrate a vested interest in the company, be willing to learn about their industry, and frequently contribute to the team, in order to advance their careers within an organization.

All participants reported that they have hired their ideal candidates in the past and maintained some confidence that they can repeat this success. Participants also acknowledged that it takes time and some luck to employ an entry-level job seeker who will grow within and contribute to their company. Staffing services, employee referrals, panel interviews, and trial work sessions, emerged as hiring strategies.

Participants generated several challenges for new employees, which center on productivity (e.g., completing tasks in a timely manner) and process (e.g., learning and adhering to company protocols). They ranked education and training and home life as the top two hiring challenges. Many participants reported a lack of confidence that their businesses can overcome home-life challenges. These participants generally believe an employee's home life remains outside their control as employers. With regard to education and training, participants reported more confidence. Participants generally agree that they can mitigate both challenges through personal and professional development opportunities within their companies.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Job Seekers Need Multiple Supports to Achieve Meaningful Work

Education and Training

Across the community and campus job-seeker focus groups, participants were enrolled in GED and trade-training classes. These participants held a diverse set of ideas about meaningful work, as evidenced by their reported ideal jobs (e.g., nurse, business owner, or welder) and the reasons they shared for pursuing these occupations (e.g., provide for their families, help people, or do something they enjoy). As expected, the majority of welding participants identified welding as an ideal job. Less than half considered welding a career choice prior to learning about the Accelerating Opportunity welding program. Participants' wide-ranging career aspirations suggest the need for training opportunities in multiple fields. Programs similar to Accelerating Opportunity may help job seekers narrow their career goals.

Reasons, such as helping people and enjoying the tasks of the reported ideal job, were mentioned more often among participants in the community groups and the Fast Track class. The participants in the welding campus group cited more reasons related to providing for themselves or their families; there was consensus that welding was a high-paying, in-demand career field. Interestingly, none of the welding participants provided reasons related to their desire to perform tasks related to welding (e.g., putting things together). Given the varied reasons for career pursuits among participants, training programs might benefit from presenting customized recruitment messages. This may increase the appeal of the program, as well as help job seekers identify a career that best fits their goals, interests, and values.

Community and campus participants articulated clear, chronological paths toward their ideal jobs. Most paths emphasized educational milestones, such as attaining a GED certificate or earning a degree. Compared to the other groups, the welding participants reported more milestones related to work experience and included these milestones earlier in their paths. The dual pursuit of a GED certificate and a trade degree may compel job seekers to prioritize work experiences earlier in their path toward their ideal job. Vocational programs offered at the high school level might also support similar career planning because students are simultaneously pursuing a high school diploma and training for a career.

On average, community and campus participants reported increased confidence when they predicated the likelihood of achieving their ideal jobs in three and five years. Participants might (a) perceive their current educational efforts as the most daunting challenges due to immediacy or limited success in previous educational experiences or (b) experience difficulty imagining future challenges related to their ideals careers. Given this, participants could benefit from academic and career advising that helps them realistically anticipate challenges beyond their current situation.

Broad-based Support Services

During all job-seeker focus groups, participants identified several significant challenges to achieving their ideal jobs, such as the cost of education and training, criminal background, discrimination, childcare, and transportation. While both groups generated a substantial list of existing and desired supports, the community participants discussed a broader set of services. These participants were notably more aware of community-based and nonprofit organizations that offered services related to education and training (e.g., free CDL classes), social supports (e.g., home ownership guidance), and financial assistance (e.g., tax support). This is likely attributed to the fact that their GED courses are embedded in

community centers that offer or refer these services. Campus job seekers may potentially benefit from increased awareness of these services via class announcements or flyers.

In addition, new and existing education and training programs should consider integrating social supports into their curriculum. Advising on available public assistance and local resources can provide basic support for job seekers while academic, career, and even personal counseling have the potential to give job seekers more personalized options for support. These types of services afford job seekers the opportunity to rely on more than sheer determination to persevere past the barriers to meaningful employment.

Job seekers should be encouraged to participate in fiscal education opportunities throughout their education and training. According to this study's demographic data, 44% of participants currently earn less than $19,999, 31% earn less than $34,999, and 41% receive public assistance (e.g., SNAP benefits). When jobs seekers with similar earnings secure meaningful employment, they will likely earn more money than they have before, and could benefit from guidance related to budgeting, navigating employer benefits (e.g., retirement, healthcare), and home ownership.

Also, several participants shared goals of becoming a business owner. These participants mentioned building credit, saving money, and securing grants and loans as ways to fund their future business ventures. While Savannah boasts many supports for current and future entrepreneurs, personal (and future business) fiscal health is critical to the success of any venture. In addition to the above-mentioned topics, these future business owners might benefit from additional savings strategies.

Job Seeking Supports

Across the community and campus groups, participants reported a limited number of milestones related to job seeking (e.g., interviewing, resume writing) in the paths to their ideal jobs. Also, prompting was necessary to initiate discussion of job-seeking resources. Some participants mentioned St. Joseph's Candler's St. Mary's Community Center, Step Up, and their teachers as supports in helping them find a job via mock interviews, career advising, and referrals. The following list offers recommendations to further support job seekers:

- *Participate in networking activities.* Several participants expressed frustration with "It's not what you know, but who you know." While this hiring practice might be perceived as unfair, word of mouth referrals play a key role in securing employment.

    o Job seekers should pursue opportunities that expand their social circles and create connections with people who already work jobs they desire or are employed with companies that offer relevant positions or career paths. These new connections could be professional acquaintances or mentors. Both would benefit job seekers.

    o In addition, job seekers might benefit from workshops that teach them how to network professionally or conduct career-related informational interviews to further support these efforts.

    o **Savannah Technical College** and partner organizations might consider offering events, including, but not limited to, job fairs that place job seekers in front of employers seeking applicants. While small businesses might only have a few positions available at a time, they should still be invited to meet with job seekers. These "family-like" work environments might be a better fit for many job seekers' professional and personal goals.

- ***Identify "fit" with potential employers***. As job seekers learn interview skills, they should be prepared to identify which employers are likely to be a good "fit" for their personal and professional goals and values, as well as their existing job and educational experiences. While there was diversity among desired ideal jobs (even within a job seeker), many participants reported that they wanted to secure employment that allows them to contribute to their community, advance in a career, and learn more. Knowing which questions to ask can help job seekers better understand a company's core values, working culture, and opportunities for advancement positions which would create a more successful and sustainable relationship between themselves and the employer.

- ***Showcase characteristics along with education and skills***. Participants in the small business focus groups prioritized personality characteristics (e.g., dependability and determination) and problem-solving and task management abilities (e.g., good judgment, time management and prioritization). While education and job-related skills are important, job seekers need to be able to explain how they have persevered past challenges, prioritized multiple responsibilities, and worked independently.

- ***Participate in internships or apprentice opportunities to gain relevant work experience***. Many participants in the small business focus groups reported that they prefer relevant work experiences to accompany job seekers' education. Internship or apprentice opportunities afford job seekers the opportunity to apply their "book knowledge" in a fast-paced work environment with multiple and changing priorities. It also allows them to practice their professionalism (e.g., dress, communication skills, and positive attitude) and customer-service skills. As reported earlier, several small businesses are interested in offering internships opportunities.

Small Businesses Seek a "Softer" Type of Employee

Throughout the small business focus groups, participants emphasized their desire for employees to demonstrate "soft skills", such as personality qualities, professionalism, communications skills, problem solving and task management skills. Several participants also expressed that employees who understood the "big picture" as it relates to company culture, policies, or procedures were well positioned to advance within their company. As participants discussed their desires and challenges related to hiring, many made the case that small businesses have different needs. These dynamic workplaces are often growing and are more sensitive to demand. This results in shifting priorities and necessitates a willingness and ability for employees to perform beyond his or her official job description and to frequently contribute to the team.

Participants ranked education and training and home life as a top hiring challenges. Few participants reported the confidence to overcome the home life challenge due to beliefs that they had limited ability to affect their employees' personal lives. However, several participants did offer mentoring and personal development opportunities as potential ways to enable their employees to mange personal struggles.

On average, participants felt more confident that their businesses could overcome challenges related to education and training. To this end, many participants requested learning experiences for job seekers to address the needs of small businesses. When discussing challenges, many participants offered suggestions related to the education and training of job seekers at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. The recommendations below reflect these sentiments.

- ***Foster a Desire to Learn***: The small business community is willing to extend the education of job seekers. For on-the-job training to be effective, the trainee must be coachable, i.e., willing to listen, ready to learn, and open to feedback. Early school and home experiences should spark

curiosity. Learning experiences at school and in the community need to create repeated opportunities for students to develop questions they wish to investigate, offer and receive constructive feedback, and recognize how working with others who contribute knowledge and expertise enhances thinking, services, and products.

- ***Develop Basic Business Knowledge:*** Hands-on experiences or classes that increase understanding of business models, cash flow, operations, and key roles. This can potentially help applicants and new hires to better understand their role in relation to the success of the company, and make more relevant and compelling the expectations for standardized systems and processes.

- ***Increase Opportunities to Gain Work Experience***: Small businesses and local educational institutions need to develop more partnerships where students can engage in intern, apprentice, or practicum experiences. It is important to note these experiences must extend beyond shadowing and neat projects that are peripheral to the company's operations. It is critical to small businesses that job seekers grow their ability to function in dynamic workplaces with competing priorities, a commitment to customer satisfaction, and requirement of personal responsibility and teamwork.

APPENDIX A (JOB SEEKERS)

Participant Demographics

Table 13 | Demographic Information for Job Seekers

	Job Seekers | Community	Job Seekers | Campus	Job Seekers (all)
N (Survey Respondents)	17	22	39
GENDER			
Male	5 (29%)	13 (59%)	18 (46%)
Female	12 (71%)	8 (36%)	20 (51%)
AGE			
<18	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
18 – 29	8 (47%)	9 (41%)	17 (44%)
30 – 45	3 (17.67%)	11 (50%)	14 (36%)
46 – 59	3 (17.67%)	1(5%)	4 (10%)
60+	3 (17.67%)	0	3 (8%)
RACE/ETHNICITY			
African-American	17 (100%)	14 (64%)	31 (79%)
White	0	5 (23%)	5 (13%)
Hispanic	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
African-American/Native American	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
Other	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
ANNUAL INCOME			
<$19,999	14 (82%)	3 (14%)	17 (44%)
$20,000-$34,999	1 (6%)	11 (50%)	12 (31%)
$35,000-$49,999	1 (6%)	3 (14%)	4 (10%)
> $75,000	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
Receive Public Assistance (e.g., SNAP)	11 (65%)	5 (23%)	16 (41%)

Discussion Guide (Job Seekers)

OBJECTIVE: To gain insight into the barriers (perceived and actual) to meaningful employment in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:
- participants' definitions and expectations about meaningful employment
- existing and desired supports while seeking meaningful employment
- perceptions of barriers to meaningful employment.

DISCUSSION: Participants will engage in a series of interactive discussions that use a variety of artifacts and activities to support the elicitation and sharing of participant ideas about each topic.
- *Data Collection*: The focus group will be audio recorded. All artifacts will be collected for further review.
- *Duration*: The focus group will last 2 hours.
- *Staffing*: Facilitator and Note taker

Optional sign-in & Refreshments served
Introductions - Name & Favorite Thing About Savannah

Discussion 1: Your Ideal Job
[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about what meaningful employment means to them.]
Take a few moments to fill out the top part of your handout.
We will take turns sharing what we wrote.
- Question 1A| What is your ideal job? Give examples.
- Question 1B| Complete this sentence |When I work as a [1 ideal job], I can . . .

- Question 1C | On a scale of 1 (not confident) to 5 (super confident), how confident do you feel that you will achieve your ideal job in 1 | 3 | or 5 years?
  Question 1D | Who would like to share why they selected their number?

Discussion 2: The Path to Your Ideal Job
[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas what it requires to attain meaningful employment.]
- Question 2A| What are the steps do you need to take to achieve your ideal job?

- Question 2B| On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you that you will achieve step 1 | 2 | 3?
- Question 2C | Who would like to share their step why they selected their number?

Discussion 3: Supports on Your Path to Your Ideal Job
[Rationale | To elicit participants' experiences about how they are supported to achieve their ideal job.]
- Question 3A| Who helps you on your path to achieve your ideal job? How?
- Question 3B| What programs help you on your path to achieve your ideal job? How?
  - ○ Are there any programs that:
    - ▪ Prepare you to apply for a specific job
    - ▪ Help you obtain a certificate
    - ▪ Train you on specific skills
    - ▪ Put you in front of employers
- Question 3C| Which steps do you receive or expect to receive the most support? How?

Discussion 4: Challenges to Achieve an Ideal Job
[Rationale | To elicit participants' perceptions of challenges that most people face when seeking meaningful employment.]
- Questions 4A | What are the top three (3) challenges most people face on the path to ideal job?

The top two (2) challenges (per participant vote) are used in this following discussion:
- Question 4B | Why do so many people face [Challenge 1 |2]?
- Question 4C | On a scale of 1 to 5, how difficult is it for most people to overcome [Challenge 1 |2]?
- Question 4D | Who would like to share their step why they selected their number?
- Question 4E | What do most people need to overcome [Challenge 1 |2]?

Closing Activity: Your Next Step
(If time, open up for additional questions or comments from participants)

APPENDIX B (SMALL BUSINESSES)

Discussion Guide (Small Businesses)

OBJECTIVE: To gain insight into how small businesses perceives the applicant pool for potential employees in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:
- requisite qualifications and characteristics for entry-level positions in a professional environment
- perceived and actual challenges to attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees
- existing and desired resources needed to overcome these challenges.

Definition communicated to small business owners: The specific focus is on entry-level positions that require a high school or GED diploma, technical or associates degree, or certifications and licensures. Such positions might include administrative assistants (e.g., receptionist or data entry), sales staff, paraprofessionals, craft or construction laborers, or machine operators.

DISCUSSION: Participants will engage in a series of interactive discussions that use a variety of artifacts and activities to support the elicitation and sharing of participant ideas about each topic.
- *Data Collection*: The focus group will be audio recorded. All artifacts will be collected for further review.
- *Duration*: The focus group will last 2 hours.
- *Staffing*: Facilitator and Note taker

Sign-in and Refreshments served
Introductions: Name and description of business

Discussion 1: Your Ideal candidate
[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about their ideal candidate and requisite qualifications.]
- Question 1A| Name a professional *entry-level* position in your organization. Describe your ideal candidate.
  Question 1B | What skills and experiences should he or she have? Why?
      (prompt for "soft" skills)
  Question 1C | What characteristics does he or she have that indicates his or her potential to advance within your organization?

- Question 2A | On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident do you feel that you will hire this candidate?
  Question 2B | Why did you select this number?
  Question 2C | Have you ever hired your ideal candidate before for a similar position?
  Question 2D | On a scale of 1 to 5, how difficult was it to find this candidate?
  Question 2E | Why did you select this number?

Discussion 2: Challenges to Hiring Your Ideal Applicant
[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about (1) challenges to attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees and (2) resources they need to overcome these challenges.]
- Question 1A| Think about your applicant pool. What keeps you from hiring your ideal candidate?
  Question 1B | Prompt with sentence starters:
  - The applicants usually needs more . . .

- The applicants struggle to . . .
- Question 1C | Research has shown that these are challenges to employment for many applicants. From this list, what are the 3 top hiring challenges?

The top two (2) challenges (per participant vote) are used in this following discussion:
- Question 2A | Why do think this [Challenge 1 |2] exists in Savannah?
- Question 2B | On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident do you feel that your business can overcome [Challenge 1 |2]?
  - Question 2C | Why did you select this number?
- Question 2D | What needs to happen so that you will have more applicants who don't face or overcome this [challenge]?

(If time, open up for additional questions or comments from participants)

SECTION 5 | RESEARCH & RESOURCES

1. Introduction

This section will provide a rough background on the range of employment hurdles faced by hard-to-employ (or "hard-to-serve") individuals. One stage of the literature review focuses on people with disabilities and people with criminal records, with gender and ethnic distinctions mentioned where appropriate. A second stage will take a detailed look at studies exploring barriers to employment utilizing focus groups comprised of job seekers.

Job seekers may face a myriad of hurdles to meaningful employment. A non-exhaustive list may include age, criminal record, disability, domestic violence, drug/alcohol abuse, insufficient education, employer bias, child with special needs, housing issues, long-term welfare recipient, in need of child care, lack of transportation, employment gaps, and so on. Researchers have documented that individuals possessing characteristics such as lack of soft skills, criminal records, large employment gaps, lack of transportation, and disabilities are less likely to be employed relative to those without such employment barriers (Danziger et al., 1999; Martinson, 2000; Olson and Pavetti, 1996, Solomon, 2012; BLS, 2012).

2. Employment Barriers and People with Disabilities

People with disabilities (PWD), such as a physical impediment, a visual or hearing limitation, or a behavioral or mental disability, are particularly vulnerable to high rates of unemployment and susceptible to experiencing multiple barriers to meaningful employment (BLS, 2012). For a detailed survey of this literature readers are directed to Lengnick-Hall et al. (2002) and references therein. Approximately 20 percent of Americans live with at least one documented form of disability. The labor force participation rate for PWD was 20.7 percent in 2012 compared to 69.1 percent for those without a disability (BLS, 2012). For PWD included in the labor force, there exists an unemployment rate of roughly 14 percent compared to a national average of 7.6 percent. Of the PWD population, half reported some barrier to employment in 2012 through the Current Population Survey (CPS) (BLS, 2012). Topping the list of hurdles for PWD included lack of education, lack of transportation, need of special features on job site, and the person's own disability.

The PWD population in Georgia is no exception to the poor employment status found at the national level. In fact, the American Community Survey administered by the U.S. Census found that 53 percent of PWD in Georgia are unemployed. However, Georgia is one of 27 states failing to implement funding from the Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) for 2010, 2011, and 2012 which is allocated and managed by the U.S. Department of Labor.

What's more, a Georgia-based study conducted by the Bobby Dodd Institute in 2006 found that PWD face numerous barriers to employment (BDI, 2006), not the least of which is a lack of experience in hiring PWD. These results are echoed by Singh and Creamer (2010) who administered surveys to 45 public sector agency managers across Georgia municipalities with the aim to identify barriers to employment for PWD. Consistent with some results from Lengnick-Hall et al. (2002), managers were overwhelmingly unaware of the incentive structure and programs available, such as the Georgia State Use Program, that reward employers for hiring PWD. The authors also find corroborating evidence within the literature that employers may discriminate against PWD (Dixon et al., 2003) and that PWD are significantly more likely to experience issues with reliable access to transportation.

3. Criminal Records as Barriers to Employment

Roughly one-third of Americans are arrested by the age of 23 and one in 100 Americans is incarcerated at any point in time (Solomon, 2012; Pew Center, 2008). Further, it is estimated that 65 million adult Americans (one in four adults) have a criminal record that would show up on a routine background check. Criminal records have been documented as a major hurdle in attaining meaningful and enduring employment. For instance, Pager and Western (2009) investigating the role of past incarceration in New York City employment endeavors, find that the presence of a criminal record reduces the likelihood of callback or job offer by 50 percent, with the penalty being substantially greater for blacks versus whites. Although one in fifteen black males age 18 and older are incarcerated compared to one in 106 for white males, this pattern of disproportionate employment barriers is likely amplified by racial discrimination in the labor market.

La Vigne and Mamalian (2004) provide a survey on prisoner reentry for the State of Georgia. The authors find that Georgia patterns to prisoner reentry are similar to those at the national level. Eight counties, including Chatham County (7 percent), constitute the largest percentage of prisoner reentry at 43 percent within the state (Fulton County had the largest share across counties at 12 percent).

Race and ethnicity aside, hard-to-serve individuals have reported frequently the obstacle presented to them on job applications dealing with checking the "box" on past criminal involvement. For example, states have unnecessarily accepted much collateral damage for past criminal activity in the form of underemployment (Haberman, 2008; Holder, 2011). That is, even after serving their time, past criminals trained in a certain trade may be prohibited from returning to their trade due to bans imposed by the state. Some states have subsequently instituted a system of redemption, whereby individuals with a criminal record may have it expunged after a certain number of offense-free years. Moreover, numerous states have limited the extent to which employers may permanently disqualify an individual with a criminal record from the applicant pool; Georgia was not among them at the state level but the

municipality of Atlanta has instituted a "ban the box" initiative with a background check after conditional offer for employment (National Employment Law Project, 2011/13).

Job hurdles are also asymmetric with respect to gender and criminal backgrounds. The study of Morris et al. (2008) explores the employment barriers for women in San Francisco, Alameda, San Mateo and Contra Costa counties who have been incarcerated in the past. The authors find that women with a history of incarceration were significantly (statistically speaking) less likely to receive a positive response from a potential employer. Results from the focus groups yielded strong insights into the pursuit of meaningful employment for these women.

The additional barriers to employment after incarceration ended were perhaps the most striking and the most widely documented. This speaks to the preponderance of multiple employment barriers that often arise making it increasingly difficult for individuals, formerly incarcerated women in this case, to pursue, attain, and retain meaningful employment. Every participant described their criminal record as a primary hurdle to job attainment. An overwhelming number of respondents noted that they fail to attempt to apply to any and every job opening that requires the "box" to be checked for past arrests, convictions, or criminal history, thereby dramatically reducing the number of job applications filed for such individuals. A common theme in the documented responses of post-incarceration struggles identified job related discrimination even for those that are hired. Such instances came in the form of reduced wages and lack of training or certificate program opportunities that do not permit individuals with criminal records to participate in. Others cited their criminal records as a barrier to housing assistance, student loans and other federal aid, only exacerbating their employment challenges.

4. Barriers to Employment for Welfare and TANF Recipients

Individuals receiving TANF (temporary assistance for needy families) have been shown to experience at least one barrier to employment with many facing multiple hurdles. What's more, the probability of employment for such individuals declines as the number of barriers increases (Bloom et al., 2011). Of the most prevalent barriers among TANF recipients are lack of education and work experience, physical and mental disabilities, and having a child with special behavioral and mental needs (Hauan and Douglas, 2004). The table at the top of the following page provides a synthesis of four data-based survey studies on the incidence of barriers to employment for TANF recipients (reproduced from Bloom et al., 2011). Roughly four in ten individuals across all included studies cited lack of sufficient education as a primary barrier to employment.

South Carolina was among the five states investigated in Hauan and Douglas (2004). Across the three categories of employment liabilities (human capital deficits, personal and family-related liabilities, and logistical or situational challenges) there was little variation across states.

Incidence of Barriers to Employment
Among TANF Recipients (National Level)[*]

Data	NSAF[a]	SIPP[b]			CPS[b]		NHIS[c]
Year	2002	2001	2003	2008	2000	2005	2005/6
No HS Diploma	41.4	43.3	40.5	29.2	40.6	41.3	
No work in past 2 yrs	19.6						
Child under age 1	18.3	14.9	12.2	17.9	16.7	17.8	
Child on SSI	7.6	6.2	5.2	5.5	n.a.	4.1	3.2
Work-Limiting Health condition	25.2	29.2	26.6	30.4	22.1	24.7	26.8
Poor mental health	24.4						13.8

[*] Reproduced from Bloom et al. (2011) Table 1
[a] Data source from Loprest and Zedlewski (2006)
[b] Data source from Acs and Loprest (2007)
[c] Data source from Loprest and Maag (2009)

Semi-public agencies have played a large role in recent years in transitioning hard-to-employ individuals, such as long-term welfare and TANF recipients, into unsubsidized longer-term employment (Kirby et al., 2002). As such, transitional jobs programs may hold useful information about the most common and detrimental barriers to employment. Staffers typically provide a variety of formal services to clients prior to enrollment, such as screening for employment barriers, psychological and basic skills tests, drug tests and criminal background checks.

Kirby et al. (2002) provide a synthesis of six major transitional job programs: PREP in Forest City, AR; TWC in Philadelphia, PA; Community Jobs in Aberdeen, WA; Community Jobs in Tacoma, WA; and Goodworks! In Augusta, GA. Kirby et al. (2002) document focus group characteristics across all six studies. However, Derr et al. (2002) investigate employment hurdles for longer-term TANF welfare recipients through Georgia's Goodworks! Program. And, since the authors focus in the state of Georgia, particular attention will be paid to the results therein. It should be noted that the Georgia Quick Start workforce development program was ranked number one in the country by Area Development Magazine and was featured prominently on The CBS Evening News in 2011 (Georgia Quick Start, 2011). Go Build Georgia also attempts to close the skills gap by promoting a more collaborative relationship between Georgia's technical college system and local employers.

The Goodworks! Program focuses on five urban or semi-urban study sites in Georgia: Bibb County (Macon), Clarke County (Athens), DeKalb County (Decatur), Fulton county (surrounding Atlanta), and Richmond County (Augusta). The primary objective of the study was to assess the promise of transitional employment and extensive employment support for individuals nearing the term limit. To do so, focus groups comprised of hard-to-employ individuals nearing the 48

month limit were conducted to help provide key insights into employment obstacles that such individuals or families experienced.

The Georgia Goodworks! Program provides extensive and personalized employment support for individuals who already face challenges to employment attainment and retention (Derr et al., 2002). The program focuses on helping those with disabilities, low levels of education and those who have received at least 30 months of TANF support transition from welfare towards self-sufficient unsubsidized employment. The program accomplishes this through various personalized services including paid work assignment typically lasting 6-9 months, enhanced social work, the assignment of personal advisors to individuals during and after the program, and job coaching prior to permanent job placement.

Overall, there has been marked success for the Georgia Goodworks! Program. Since 1999 job placement rates for all individuals across all study sites – including those who do not finish the program successfully - ranged from 35 to 70 percent, with Richmond (the most experienced county using the program) receiving the highest rate and Fulton County the lowest. Placement rates for those who successfully complete the program ranged from 54 percent in Bibb County to 85 percent in Richmond County.

One of the key challenges faced by the Goodworks! program is working with those individuals with personal and familial employment barriers. Since most program participants have already experienced numerous barriers to employment prior to the program, one objective central to the programs viability and success is to identify as soon as possible the employment barriers specific to each individual. Personalized advisors meet frequently with clients to address employment barriers aiding in the personalized, flexible, and creative nature of ultimately placing participants in unsubsidized work.

In one section of analysis, Derr et al. (2002) incorporate a data collection methodology based on three-day site visits comprised of current and former program participant interviews and focus groups in assessing the efficacy of the overall Goodworks! program. State administrative data collected by Goodworks! staff indicate that 65 percent of all program participants state-wide had no source of transportation. In addition, half the participants reported having a pre-school aged child and nearly 50 percent of individuals lacked any form of child care. Educational barriers were also quite pervasive across the study sites. Just over one third of participants attained at least 12 years of education. Findings from focus groups analysis were largely consistent with administrative data.

Clients consistently reported transportation issues, insufficient educational achievement, and housing-related factors as the primary employment barriers before and after the Goodworks! program. Interestingly, focus group participants touted the attention given by Goodworks! personal advisors towards factors that likely make a difference for successful job placement. These resources included, but are not limited to, appropriate work attire, eyeglasses, and dental work.

Much of the qualitative evidence collected from the focus groups revealed that these hard-to-employ individuals faced many personal challenges such as fear of being independent, lack of trust, mental health issues, domestic abuse, and children with health and behavioral issues. It seems that the close interaction with clients and personal advisors in the Goodworks! program served as a catalyst for participants to "open up" in an honest way about their particular circumstances and the underlying barriers they face. In fact, focus group analysis indicates that current clients speak with their personal advisor at least once a week while past clients still communicate at a monthly frequency.

Granted, Georgia has experienced an increase in the TANF work participation rate since 2006 (Schott, 2007). However, much of the increase in employment participation stems from the dramatic and consistent decrease in workforce caseloads (Schott, 2007).

The transitional jobs programs aimed at TANF and welfare recipients show great promise, in part due to their recognition that there is no "one size fits all" approach to assisting the hard-to-employ. For example, using panel data from 1997-1999, Danzinger and Seefeldt (2002) find that the largest barriers to meaningful employment for single mothers nationally were (i) child with health problem (15.7%), (ii) major depressive episode (12.9%), and (iii) no HS diploma (12.7%). This is compared to the Women's Employment Study (WES) administered to a sample of white or African American single mothers residing in an urban Michigan city receiving welfare and/or TANF assistance between the ages of 18 and 54. Women from the WES sample, reported lack of transportation (47.1%), no HS diploma (31.4%), major depressive episode (25.4%), and child with a health problem (22.1%) as the major employment obstacles. This study provides one instance of the compounding impacts of barriers to employment for individuals already facing challenges.

A reoccurring theme across focus group-based studies concerns transportation. The participants in Hall and Carroll (2008) not only report lack of transportation in both urban and rural areas as an employment barrier but they cite difficulty in procuring a driver's license as an additional impediment. This latter hurdle was found to be most problematic for individuals applying for jobs that require a driver's license, even if the job required no driving responsibilities whatsoever.

5. *Addressing* Barriers to Employment: A Case Study of SAWDC

The primary purpose of this article is to survey the applicable and relevant literature on focus group-based analyses of barriers to employment at the national, regional, and local levels. In doing so, patterns to employment hurdles have been identified and a list of best practices has been loosely constructed. However, above the problem of identifying the barriers to employment, the issue of addressing and remedying the problem requires much additional research from alternative approaches. Here, an overview of the Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council (SAWDC) based around the Mobile, Alabama area is provided.

The Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council has partnered with numerous agencies including the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) to establish a feedback pipeline from the K-12 educational system and local/regional workforce employers. The aim of this partnership is to provide mutually beneficial information to better design and implement curriculum and develop skill-sets commensurate with the goal of meaningful STEM-based employment in the local manufacturing sector. According to the FRB of Atlanta (2012), manufacturing employers in the Mobile, Alabama region have noted that this partnership has resulted in 20 years of growth in the local manufacturing industry. So what can Chatham County learn from the accomplishments and experiences of SAWDC?

There have been increasing vacancies for "middle-skill" jobs amongst an already depressed labor force participation rate. Middle-skill jobs are those that require training beyond a high school diploma but not a four year degree. Middle skill training is typically provided by community colleges, vocational training based agencies, etc.

SAWDC and MAEF aim to address the middle-skill set labor market deficit leading to widespread vacancies across manufacturing and other sectors. Simply, it is not enough for the 21st century labor market demands to merely attempt to prepare our youth for college. And, in fact, U.S. youth have been one of the hardest hit demographics in terms of employment due to the great recession ending in 2009. As noted in a Harvard Graduate School of Education document titled Pathways to Prosperity, "The percentages of teens and young adults who are working are now at the lowest levels recorded since the end of the 1930s Depression."

CHMURA Economic Analytics and SAWDC have developed a complete employment development package for the region. The CHMURA study provides a great model for what may be investigated in the Coastal Georgia and Chatham County regions. The foundation for the project as written-up in CHMURA (2011) states:

"The Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council (SAWDC), through a competitive bid process, solicited a request for proposal for project management and consulting services to analyze the labor supply and demand for the following targeted industries: aerospace, ship-building, process manufacturing, construction, and healthcare. The ultimate goal of the project is to provide educators, career-advisors, one-stop partners and workforce professionals in the education, training, and employment system with labor market information by which they can develop a comprehensive plan for adult and youth career pathways. In turn, these pathways will help fill the need for skilled workers within the targeted areas.

This project formed the basis for a complete solution for workplace development. The solution included leveraging existing datasets, methods and technology to:
- *describe the region's economic and labor market conditions*
- *delineate the labor and skill demanded by each industry*
- *Identify the education, knowledge and skill components required for critical occupations*
- *Identify the occupational-driven demand for instructional programs*
- *Inform job seekers and students of employment opportunities in targeted industries"*

Now, a recent study by Unruh (2011) focusing on the America South middle-skills gap, states,

> *Middle-skill jobs account for 51 percent of the region's jobs today and will continue to account for the largest portion of jobs into the next decade. What's more, middle-skill jobs will account for 44 percent of job openings in the next decade, making them the engine of the American South's economy. But while 51 percent of current jobs are middle-skill, only 43 percent of the region's workers are currently trained to the middle-skill level, a gap that threatens to undermine economic growth and innovation efforts.*

The study finds that:
> *• The American South faces a middle-skill gap today.*
> *• Based on educational projections, the region's middle-skill gap will widen without new efforts.*
> *• Based on population projections, closing the gap will require strategies that specifically target adult workers long past the traditional K-12 to postsecondary pipeline.*

For Georgia, over 50 percent of all jobs in 2009 were middle-skilled jobs. And, 45 percent of all job openings between 2008 and 2018 will be middle-skilled in nature. Projections of future educational attainment suggest that the middle-skill gap will widen for the State (Unruh, 2011).

6. Resources Guide for Addressing Barriers to Employment

A quick start guide for underemployment concerns can be found in Brown (2001), Chapter 3. A few additional pillars that show promise in this regard include:

- Implement transitional jobs program(s) (Kirby et al. 2002)
- Follow the Georgia Goodworks! model (Derr et al. 2002)
- Institute a bilateral and interdependent channel between employers and educators (Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta 2013, and references therein)
- Identify the fastest growing industrial sectors with the greatest level of estimated annual job openings in the state/region (service, retail sales, and healthcare, Goergia DOL, http://explorer.dol.state.ga.us/faqinfo.asp?session=faq&geo=1301000000&faqq=3
- Investigate the nature of job growth in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) http://explorer.dol.state.ga.us/mis/current/stem.pdf
- Educate employers about hiring people with disabilities and other demographic, educational, and income-related employment barriers (http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/products/employmentguide/disabilityemployment101.pdf)
- Comprehensive guidance for serving the hard-to-employ make a successful transition from welfare/TANF to meaningful employment can be found at Brown (2001) http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/beyond_work_first.pdf
- Help facilitate a public and private relationship that address those barriers to employment that directly or indirectly inhibit individuals' ability to find and maintain meaningful employment within the locality

- Bloom et al. (2007) explore four different programs across the country (New York, Kansas/Missouri, Philadelphia, and Rhode Island) for assisting hard-to-employ parents/families

Section Summary

This section aimed to provide a literature overview of the common barriers to meaningful employment at a national, regional, and local level. Background on the most pervasive employment hurdles, such as physical disability, lack of education, and criminal histories, were documented from studies that utilized focus group-based analysis. Information from this research showed a wide range of employment impediments and that there is a compounding effect between the number of hurdles an individual possesses and employment procurement and retention. Underemployment patterns at the state and local levels share many regularities with those at the national level. In particular, the state of Georgia (and the U.S. as a whole) is facing a widening middle-skills gap. Lastly, a discussion of southwest Alabama's approach to addressing skills deficiencies in the workforce is provided along with a resources guide on the matter.

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