



Workforce Alliance (WA)
LWDB Strategic Planning Session #1
Current Labor Market Needs & Trends
Wednesday, August 13, 2025
Executive Summary

The purpose of this session was to begin the process of updating the Workforce Alliance 2026 – 2028 strategic plan. A series of five sessions are scheduled to engage WA Board members, community partners, elected officials, economic development agencies and philanthropic organizations in the planning process. This first session, Current Labor Market Needs and Trends, focused on hearing directly from employers about hiring needs and skills gaps in order to identify themes and patterns in the regional economy.

Employer Panel:

- Advanced Manufacturing: Cheryl Childers, Cox Machine
 - Cox Machine specializes in manufacturing precision parts, components and assemblies for the aerospace, deep space and semiconductor industries.
- Healthcare, Marilou Mewborn, Ascension Via Christi
 - Ascension Via Christi is a not for profit healthcare system with special attention to serving the poor and vulnerable.
- Data / IT: Chris Wyant, FlagshipKansas
 - Flagship Kansas.Tech represents the IT/Data Tech field and represents professionals across Kansas who, though often small in number within individual companies, form a crucial backbone for business operations.
- Construction / Skilled Trades: Owen Shigley, Shigley Construction and Wichita Area Builders Association (WABA)
 - WABA is an industry association of home builders and remodelers that advocates for its members on local, state and national issues related to the construction industry.

Challenges:

Construction -

- Labor shortages are a factor in decreased home production
- Aging workforce, average age of 41, and the need to transfer knowledge before retirements
- Evolving materials, regulatory changes
- Labor competition from economic development in different regions

Healthcare -

- Ascension Via Christi is the fifth largest employer in town with 5,400-5,500 core staff, they face staffing challenges for nurses and allied health positions, with many workers approaching retirement in the next 4-5 years.
- Losing the knowledge of those retiring (Who is going to train new staff?)
- Needing to outsource some services/3rd party contractors
- Concerns about AI replacing jobs
- Challenges in attracting talent to Wichita, Kansas, even for high-level healthcare positions like COO and CNO roles, despite offering competitive salaries and benefits. (Candidates from coastal areas have misconceptions about the Midwest and salary expectations.)

- Recruitment challenges extend to entry-level positions, jobs like PCTs or CNAs that were once highly sought after now face competition from retail and remote work opportunities offering comparable pay.

Manufacturing Industry -

- Industry is very cyclical
- Labor shortages
- Many skilled machinists retiring
- Difficult to recruit - Misconception that manufacturing is a difficult and dirty job.
- Introducing more robotics and technology, and bridging the gap between highly skilled machinists and operators.
- AI will impact Cox Machine, particularly in the semiconductor side. They will continue to need skilled workers who possess both technological and manual skills.
- Strong industry demand due to aging machines and airplanes.

IT/Data Tech -

- Kansas' labor force has grown steadily at about 4% annually for the past decade, while businesses increasingly need to address cybersecurity, cloud computing, data efficiency, and digital tools to remain competitive.
- Tech changes in the next 10 years will change the way business competes
- Develop technology training that bridges business context with technical skills.
- The concept of technology maturity curve was explained, noting that companies have different IT needs based on their development stage, and there is a growing importance of AI with predictions of billion-dollar single-person companies emerging within 2-3 years.
- AI has limitations as a generative system that may not work well for deterministic business needs, and recommends finding employees who can continuously learn as technology evolves while also understanding specific business requirements.
- Importance of understanding the fundamentals of problem-solving while acknowledging that technology needs differ across industries, suggesting investment in shared infrastructure.

General:

- Potential for creating hands-on summer programs with employer partnerships, similar to the "future ready" model, to engage young people with financial incentives while meeting them where their interests lie.
- More employees now prioritize work-life balance issues like childcare. And this must be factored into employment.
- Collaborate with educational institutions to ensure training programs align with evolving industry needs.
- Explore how AI and technology can improve operational efficiencies while addressing employee concerns about job displacement.
- Challenges in staffing rural areas like Cox Machine in Harper, Kansas location, where they draw employees from 38 different communities
- Importance of recognizing changing workforce needs, partnering with organizations like Workforce Alliance, and making the local community attractive to talent

Attendees:

- Cheryl Childers, Cox Machine
- Dr. Tamara Daniel, Butler Community College
- Robyn Heinz, Vornado
- Eric Hunt, DCF
- Kathy Jewett, WA
- Pat Jonas, CPRF
- Jill Kuehny, Kanokla via Zoom
- Alan McNary, WA Board Chair/PEC
- Marilou Mewborn, Ascension
- Alex Munoz, Creekstone Farms via Zoom
- Erica Ramos, KDC
- Luis Rodriguez, TEC Systems via Zoom
- Chip Schellhorn, CMJ Manufacturing
- Dr. Michelle Schoon, Cowley College via Zoom
- Peter Bodyk, DCF
- Suzi Finn, FlagshipKansas.Tech
- Megan Harper, Twin Valley/Flagship via Zoom
- Stacia Kaylor, Textron
- Jeff Longwell, Gilley's Cares
- Andrew Nave, GWP
- Lindsay McWilliams, Goodwill
- Jennifer Mueller, Harvey County Econ. Dev.
- Johanna Pfaff, Gilley's
- Emily Rugg, Textron
- Owen Shigley, Shigley Construction
- Chris Wyant, FlagshipKS.Tech

Staff -

- Marcy Aycock, REAP
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- Chad Pettera



Workforce Alliance (WA) LWDB Strategic Planning Session #2 Labor Market Data & Community Partnerships Wednesday, August 26, 2025

The purpose of this session was to continue the process of updating the Workforce Alliance 2026 – 2028 strategic plan. A series of five sessions are scheduled to engage WA Board members, community partners, elected officials, economic development agencies and philanthropic organizations in the planning process. This second session focused on labor market data and community partnerships.

Workforce Economic Trends

Data was reviewed on various economic trends and workforce challenges in the Wichita area, focusing on key area employment sectors: aviation, healthcare, construction & trades and IT. Wichita area data was compared to data for the State of Kansas. The presentation included current and projected working population, employment and unemployment information as well as reviewed how the data related to last session's employer panel.

- Unemployment runs higher in this region than the state ie., cyclical nature of aviation industry
- This region is projected to have slower population growth than the state overall.
- Continual decline of rural populations and build-up of urban areas.
- Construction Data -
 - Lower wages in the region compared to the state.
 - Industry losing workforce recruited to other areas of the state
- Advanced Manufacturing –
 - Wages much higher than the state and not much projected growth.
 - There are many unknowns and staff will need to continue monitoring Boeing/Spirit transition and potential production increases in the aviation sector in the future. Will affect need for workers.
- Healthcare –
 - Many openings particularly in nursing; difficult to recruit to fill these positions.
 - Address wage gap and geographical challenges in healthcare recruitment to retain local talent.
 - Continued growth in the industry; need to address employment shortages.
 - Monitor developments/impact of the new Bio Health Science campus partnership between Wichita State University, University of Kansas, and WSU Tech.
- IT/Data -
 - Technology skills needs across industries despite projected employment decline in the sector.
 - There is a need to consider market projections with caution, noting uncertainties and the importance of technology advancements, particularly in cybersecurity.
 - Many jobs posted are no longer relevant – Change in actual reduction in technology or change in the way technology is classified across jobs? If the latter, then data is off.
- Logistics and Distribution –
 - Another industry to look at as a key sector is due to projected employment needs and growth of populations.

Community Partner Panel Discussion:

The panelists discussed employment trends, technology impacts, and the importance of community partnerships in addressing workforce needs. Key comments are summarized below.

Panelists:

- Steve Shepelwich, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City
- Laura Ritterbush, Goodwill of Kansas
- Dr. Tamara Daniel, Butler County Community College
- John Buckley, Textron Aviation/Veteran's Advocacy Board
- Jaime Nix, Wichita Public Libraries

Federal Reserve's Workforce Development Focus

- Community Development for economic growth to work needs to be opportunity for everyone to participate and benefit. Focus low and moderate economic income communities – affordable housing, small business development, skills training
- Community Reinvestment Act - Banks looking to reinvest in a local community to support economic mobility. Possible partnerships with workforce development boards.
- Themes heard from traveling to seven states in region to keep informed on employment trends to inform leadership so decisions such as interest rates, monetary policy, etc.
 - Non-degree credentials are increasingly respected as viable career paths, contrary to previous beliefs of needing a four-year degree.
 - Funding uncertainties are significantly affecting workforce development organizations and their partners. Many workforce boards are merging. Not being as aggressive or innovative.
 - Shift in training demand, with more emphasis on incumbent worker training over new hire training.
 - Technological and process disruptions are affecting middle workers' career advancement opportunities.
 - Every area has concerns about workers moving out of the area. Where are they moving to? Need to really focus on people you have.

Veteran Advocacy Board Initiatives

- Many challenges and issues with transitioning military return to civilian employment.
- VAB supports Home Base Wichita to assist helps military personnel and spouses find employment. Recruiting these individuals from areas outside Wichita and the state to find employment here.
- Initiatives -
 - Successfully obtained legislation to allow military spouses to use their licenses in Kansas without the time, effort and cost of re-certification.
 - Collaboration with WSU Tech and American Manufacturing Institute to provide A&P license training for transitioning service members paid for by the WA's One Workforce Grant.
- There is a great need for continued funding and business participation particularly from those that benefit from these programs, to sustain these programs.

Community College Workforce Development

- Community colleges play important role in workforce development and economic mobility.
- Community colleges are more nimble than universities in addressing the changing workforce needs of student and employers.
- Goals -
 - Important to build relationships with businesses and industries with regular face to face visits with the appropriate staff to discover their needs and be able to show how those needs can be addressed.

- There is a continuous need everywhere to address soft skills in students. Create a role-playing model program to address issues that was paid by businesses who then participated at the end of the program to observe students and select those that they wanted to interview.
- Apprenticeship programs – Scale up these programs
 - German model - 10th grade must choose apprenticeship or university Out on floor and then in small rooms to the side for instruction.
 - Important to focus on the 40% of students who are not engaged in education or career paths early on and do not yet have a passion for anything.
 - Pre-apprenticeships – Challenges with the different cultures of the schools.

Wichita Library's Community Support Initiatives

- Depend on alternative funding to provide service beyond core functions.
- Focus on early learning support, family engagement, and modern library services, connected invested in human development addressing social isolation, parental stress, etc.
- Strategic shift towards providing free meeting spaces for nonprofits and educational groups that are mission aligned.
- Plans to expand digital literacy programs and research – Currently, can book an appointment with a librarian for a fee, but goal is to partner with other organizations such as Lead For America and those with tech skills to assist in this way. Mentorship opportunities and connections with education programs to broaden skills.
- Creating a collective impact cafe at the Advanced Learning Library to support job readiness and mentorship. Furthers the mission of Connect, Discover, Learn, and Thrive.

Goodwill Comprehensive Community Programs

- Programs and services include retail stores, manufacturing facilities, education initiatives, and community centers.
- Retail stores provides funds to operate several of their other programs in workforce development and employ and support individuals with disabilities and criminal records.
- Manufacturing facility includes repackage and assembly and employ those not quite ready for traditional employment – justice involved etc. These are transitional opportunities and support is provided to assist them in moving beyond
- Adult education includes English language learning, high school diploma 1,300 students last year
- Digital skills and literacy services – Mobile lab
- Opportunity Center is a place to meet needs of an area or neighborhood either thru Goodwill or by another partner. Centers provide resume assistance, interview skills, job search digital literacy, etc. high school diploma, English learning, tax prep expungement clinic. Meets needs and helps with transportation barrier.
- Help employers engage untapped workforce. Example - Partnership with THRIVE restaurant group using a success coach not Human resources representative of the organization. Help manage roadblocks so they don't just quit. Stay engaged in the workforce and build confidence.
- Exploring ways to improve partnerships, continue to scale services effectively without decreasing quality of service

Next Steps:

The Workforce Alliance strategic planning process will continue with upcoming sessions on September 17th, October 7th and October 22nd. All attendees were encouraged to attend as many sessions as they are able.

Attendees:

1. Pete Bodyk, DCF
2. John Buckley, Textron Aviation/Veterans Advocacy Board
3. Cheryl Childers, Cox Machine/WA Board
4. Jerome Crawford, Machinists Union
5. Dr. Tamara Daniel, Butler Community College
6. Suzy Finn, FlagshipKS.Tech
7. Kathy Jewett, WA Board
8. Pat Jonas, CPRF/WA Board via Zoom
9. Stacia Kaylor, Textron Aviation
10. Jill Kuehny, Kanokla/WA Board Member via Zoom
11. Alana McNary, PEC/WA Board Chair
12. Lindsay McWilliams, Goodwill
13. Alex Munoz, Creekstone Farms/WA Board via Zoom
14. Jaime Nix, Wichita Library
15. Erica Ramos, Kansas Department of Commerce
16. Laura Ritterbush, Goodwill
17. Chip Schellhorn, CMJ Manufacturing
18. Dr. Michelle Schoon, Cowley College via Zoom
19. Steve Shepelwich, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City
20. Jeff Usher, Kansas Health Foundation
21. Lindsay Wilke, Kansas Health Foundation
22. Chris Wyant, FlagshipKS.Tech
23. Jimmy Yeager, Machinists Union

Staff -

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6. Connor Martin
7. Chad Pettera