

Insights from
Niagara Networks & Industry Collaborative

Hosted by



May 24, 2023

Report by



workforce
COLLECTIVE

What's driving Niagara? What's holding us back?

On May 24, 2023, the South Niagara Chambers of Commerce convened 56 individuals from organizations representing a wide range of industry stakeholders – from businesses and employers to educators and economic developers.

The event provided a forum for attendees to connect in person with potential customers, suppliers, and vendors. Deepening connection through dialogue, industry leaders were invited into small groups to openly discuss challenges and opportunities their sectors are anticipating and exchange ideas for how to address them.

Key insights

Seven roundtable discussions were grouped by industry: education, healthcare, home building, manufacturing, real estate, small business, and tourism. Opportunities, challenges, and solutions were discussed in each.

Across these conversations, many themes emerged such as:

- Productivity challenges related to talent attraction & retention
- Shifting values and expectations (e.g. work-life balance)
- Technology and our ability to adapt to tech evolution
- Collaboration – working with partners and stakeholders in new ways

Opportunities and challenges

Due to an aging workforce and falling fertility rates for the past several decades, there are more people leaving the labour market than entering. Employers (business owners, people leaders, HR personnel) across all sectors are facing labour shortages. Combine that with an education system designed around linear career pathways – rather than transferable skillsets – and we have significant talent gaps. Further, the “state of everything” has changed over the past few years, and many acknowledged things will not, and perhaps cannot, go back to the way they were in 2019.

At the education table, the benefits of working more closely with employers were discussed. We need to listen to what employers need and develop better education and training to meet those needs. At the same time, we also need to spark a love of learning in students so that they can better adapt and develop 21st century competencies¹.

¹ OECD (2020), *What Students Learn Matters: Towards a 21st Century Curriculum*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d86d4d9a-en>

Ideating solutions: How might we facilitate a skills-based approach to workforce development? How can we support employers to connect with and mentor incoming talent?

Education correlates with health outcomes and this reality was discussed at the healthcare roundtable. In addition to education, many other social determinants of health² (e.g., income and employment, working life conditions, and housing) were emphasized in conversations amongst the various roundtables.

Through the covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that health is an economic imperative. When we are healthy and have access to good healthcare, our economy is healthy too. Unfortunately, healthcare worker burnout rates are high and our healthcare system is fragile.

Ideating solutions: How can we re-prioritize resources (like funding) to create a better healthcare system? How can partnerships within healthcare and across other sectors be better leveraged to support the community?

There is no question that housing affordability and attainability is a challenge in Niagara. For home builders, they indicated there are delays in the home building process due to politics, zoning issues and labour shortages (e.g., skilled trades). In a similar frame, employers in real estate indicated the challenge of buyer mindsets and expectations when looking for homes in a market that is challenging to enter.

Ideating solutions: How might office buildings that are now mostly unoccupied be repurposed? How could building approval processes be streamlined; how can regulators in the sector collaborate more? How can optimism be supported again in this space?

In manufacturing, the group discussed both the opportunities and challenges of being in an industry that is supported both globally and locally, alongside opportunities for collaboration (e.g. within supply chain and logistics) to be better positioned for emerging industries (e.g. Electric Vehicle-battery value chain). Another overarching factor this group noted was that workplaces many now have employees spanning four generations, so recruitment efforts must adapt to current needs.

² *Non-medical factors that influence health outcomes (World Health Organization, Retrieved May 2023 from https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1)*

Ideating solutions: How can employers adapt to current needs? How can succession planning be implemented when considering the looming crisis of workforce shortages and changes?

Within tourism in Niagara, there is an opportunity to collaborate and promote extended stays (e.g., as visitors tend to bundle Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake trips together) in addition to opportunities to extend the tourism season through these collaborations.

Ideating solutions: How can the industry collaborate to strengthen local tourism? How can tourism be emphasized as a trade, while also modernizing recruitment strategies?

Small Businesses discussed the importance of technology, and how they impact opportunities (e.g., using social media strategically, leveraging virtual webinars for training), challenges (e.g., expectations of both the incoming workforce and customers), and solutions.

Ideating solutions: how can employers invest in developing their workplace culture? How can networks like alumni associations and rotary clubs help support hiring? What are opportunities for assistance for established small businesses (as much assistance tends to be for start-ups)?

Recommended next steps

Explore the solutions generated during the event. In some cases, these solutions are ideas and in other cases – they are being implemented and piloted right now.

Solutions

- support for employers (education table)
 - e.g. Employer & Resource Navigator
- *How can health be central in our workforce development?*
- affordable housing task force
- succession planning (manufacturing table)
- modernize employee recruitment (tourism table)
- There is a lot of support available for startups, but what about established small businesses?

Let's work together!

[Workforce Collective](#) is a non-profit organization that serves our community's efforts to address workforce challenges and opportunities through research, data, and collaboration. We nurture new ways of thinking and doing, and act as a central hub for developing labour-related solutions.