

**Niagara Networks & Industry Collaborative
Facilitated Discussion Summary**

Hosted by



May 9, 2024

Report by



EVENT CONTEXT

On May 9, 2024, the South Niagara Chambers of Commerce convened organizations representing a wide range of industry stakeholders – from businesses and employers to educators and economic developers.

This event gave attendees an opportunity to dive into the current and future landscape of work and identify challenges and opportunities. Alongside networking activities and a facilitated panel discussion from innovators in Niagara, attendees took part in facilitated discussions focused on

- [employer learning and capacity building](#)
- [demographic changes](#)
- [modernizing employee recruitment](#)
- [use of AI in the workplace](#)

These themes were highlighted as key priorities to South Niagara Chambers of Commerce's attendees survey. Summaries of these discussion are outlined below.

EMPLOYER LEARNING & CAPACITY BUILDING

This session focused on five questions:

1. What type of learning and/or capacity building do you have within your organization?
2. What opportunities exist within your organizations to expand learning and capacity building?
3. What are the challenges that are keeping you from implementing new initiatives in this space?
4. What are some tangible items that you can take away from this to begin to grow capacity within your organization?
5. What are some of the things you have already tried or implemented to successfully integrate employer learning and capacity building?

Challenges & Solutions in Resource Management: Key challenges were around lack of investment in training and having to halt operations to train. Many small businesses indicated that there is a lack of expertise: staff know the products or pieces of the business but are unsure how to address employment challenges and how to train/develop employees.

To address this, solutions must be robust while also efficiently managing resources. Technology could be a solution (e.g., automation of tasks to allow time for training) alongside working with training institutions. The group also noted that documenting these learnings and processes is critical for long-term effectiveness.

Capacity in Recruitment & Retention: Ways to address capacity constraints when recruiting included using referral programs to find staff, connecting with educational institutions to link to students seeking work, and considering job requirements when recruiting. Additional ways to help resource staffing needs included contracting out pieces of work (e.g., HR, payroll, IT) and exploring shared resource models.

Capacity in Training & Development: There were many suggestions for types of training solutions including funding opportunities for training; creating upskilling workshops; developing comprehensive onboarding processes; and collaborating with high schools, colleges, and universities to connect with students to offer training. Some areas that employers have already tried or implemented training include helping people understand business literacy, taxes, and operations. Empowering employees is crucial. To do so, it is important to encourage junior staff to teach and lead others and ensure that staff are involved and can provide feedback on processes and innovative opportunities in the workplace. Last, training should be appropriate for different ways of learning (e.g., available online, in-person).

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

This session focused on four questions:

1. How have demographic changes impacted your business/organization?
2. What are the opportunities that you see within these demographic changes?
3. What are the challenges that these demographic changes will bring? What steps can you take to better align yourself with the new demographics?
4. What are some of the things you have already done to take advantage of these demographic changes?

Many of the demographic shifts focused on the age of the population and workforce in addition to changes from immigration. These changes result in several areas for consideration.

Adapting to Age Cohort Shifts & Workforce Needs: Businesses now see multi-generational workforces which has resulted in changes to things like work-life balance priorities and the need to adjust recruitment strategies. Further, ensuring the workplace supports workplace retention of older and younger generations is key. To do this, employers could offer flexible, part-time, or hybrid work environments; create succession plans to accommodate an aging work force; mentorship and PD/leadership opportunities to bridge generational gaps and support employee growth and engagement; and ensure resources and recruitment efforts are done in a variety of methods (e.g., digital, printed, use of social media).

Inclusivity & Multicultural Integration: As Niagara has seen increases in immigration over the past few years, it is important to emphasize inclusivity and multicultural integration to support diverse demographic needs. Opportunities to engage exist through programs like the Canadian Newcomers Opportunities (CANOE) program, government initiatives like the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP), celebrating cultural diversity, ensuring resources are available to suit unique needs, and expanding networking/mentoring programs and educational opportunities around inclusion.

Consideration of Life Impacts on Work: Businesses must address housing affordability challenges and adapt their offerings to cater to different lifestyle preferences and economic conditions. There is also a growing focus on work-life balance; employers should be aware of the importance of mental health, create realistic workplace expectations to support employee well-being, and promote wellness and accessibility for the aging population (e.g., enhancing accessibility to work from home).

MODERNIZING EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT

This session focused on five key questions:

1. What is your employee recruitment strategy?
2. How are you able to modernize your employee recruitment strategy, and what is holding you back from improving it (if anything)?
3. What are the opportunities that you see with a modernized employee recruitment strategy?
4. What are some collective opportunities as a chamber that can be looked at for supporting employee recruitment to the region?
5. Is onboarding and retention part of your recruitment strategy?

Recruitment Strategies: Employer strategies include using social media, online job boards, word of mouth, connecting with local training/education programs, engaging more with immigration systems/newcomers, using video applications, and hosting working interviews. To filter through job applicants, employers also use software, applicant tracking systems, and AI to filter through job applicants.

Challenges, however, are that AI screenings tools can be unreliable, or individuals may self-select out of applications if there are pre-screening tools. Some online tools available through job boards provide resources to help employers post jobs but they are sometimes too generic for employers and require more personalized approaches.

Training & Retention Strategies: Some employers noted that, due to the pandemic, training has suffered. Thus, developing effective training programs is essential. Some indicated that options like cross-training employees, apprenticeship programs, and creating internal growth opportunities help employees feel more comfortable and connected.

A focus on flexible work also may assist with retention. Options like flexible schedules, shorter work weeks, and paid vacation time are related to productivity and job satisfaction. However, it is important to balance the benefits of these options with remote work challenges (e.g., boundary setting, engagement, some industries cannot offer remote work as an option to employees, etc.)

Chamber Opportunities and Community Engagement: Chambers of Commerce play a significant role in connecting businesses and promoting community engagement. Discussion indicated that the Chambers provides an opportunity to network with other employers and a place to develop partnerships between schools and industry. However, some noted that not everyone is educated on the benefits of Chambers of Commerce so opportunities might not be fully realized.

USE OF AI

This session focused on 5 key questions:

1. What tools are you using in AI? Is it ChatGPT?
2. What are some of the things you have done in utilizing A.I.?
3. What are the biggest areas of concern you have with A.I.?
4. Where do you see the value in using A.I. for your business?
5. What steps can you take to become more familiar with A.I. to support your business?

AI Applications and Integration: Much of the conversation focused on tools like ChatGPT and AI tools that can assist in tasks like marketing and content creation, compiling/summarizing data and information, design development, copywriting, image creation, online ticketing, and administration. One of the key benefits of using AI is saving time conducting routine tasks.

Challenges and Considerations: Adopting AI involves balancing the time invested into learning AI alongside the rapid pace of technological change. One challenge, therefore, is hiring staff that are savvy in the area or can quickly learn. More general challenges with AI include maintaining trust and authenticity in AI-generated outputs, addressing security and privacy concerns (e.g., copyright infringement, confidential information fed into the system, etc.), potential job losses in sectors due to AI, and ensuring quality control.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may face unique hurdles in navigating AI adoption, particularly given the lack of regulatory guidance and the need for internal policies around AI use. Businesses should also consider practices around verifying AI-generated content to ensure responsible use. Last, while AI can create many efficiencies, it needs to be balanced with human input, creativity, and judgment to ensure output quality is maintained.

While AI is increasingly prevalent, discussion highlighted that the importance of human skills and relationship building remains crucial. Training in both AI usage and interpersonal skills is important in the workplace. Businesses must focus on teaching employees how to leverage AI while maintaining accountability, communication, and customer relationships.

Support and Resources for AI Implementation: There is a growing need for resources to help businesses navigate AI. Chambers of Commerce and other organizations are developing tools and strategies to support members in integrating AI. The role of a concierge or consultant to guide AI adoption is becoming increasingly important, highlighting the need for accessible expertise and continuous learning.