

Our Changing Workforce:

Employee Retention, Salary and Job Benefits, Candidate Expectations, and Hiring.

A recent eye-opening press release caught my attention and accurately illustrated the current state of our local and national workforce hiring shortages. In October, "...we plan to hire more than 100,000 people...many of whom will have an offer in hand within 30 minutes of applying," stated Nando Cesarone, President, US Operations for UPS. UPS also indicated that those who accept offers could be on the job within two hours of job acceptance.

According to FRED Economic Data, there are 9.2 million unfilled jobs in the US, and more than 4 million of those jobs are located in the South (including Virginia). Businesses across virtually every industry are scrambling to find talent from the bottom to the top of the organizational chart and finding increasingly innovative ways to attract and retain qualified candidates. Our economy cannot grow to its potential as long as staffing shortfalls prevent these businesses from operating at capacity.

Over the summer, stories began to emerge of large employers offering hiring bonuses for entry-level workers for the first time. Restaurants offer complimentary appetizers for anyone willing to sit down for an interview for front-of-house positions, and kitchen staff hires are gifted with professional knife sets. Some hotels are offering complimentary accommodations onsite and a guaranteed path into management-track programs. Others are now offering tuition reimbursement, not only for employees but also for their spouses and dependents.

One can attribute this staffing shortage to several reasons, all of which have been triggered by the seismic impact of Covid. I bet you know people who have entirely changed their professional goals, either due to practical reasons like a layoff or a more significant, more philosophical decision to redirect their focus. These people explore utterly different career options, start their own ventures, take some time off, or retire.

Another factor in the gaping hole in our workforce is the disruption of childcare and the ongoing uncertainties in school/childcare accessibility. The Delta variant has been a significant setback for many parents (predominantly women) returning to a full-time job.

Neil Williamson, President of the Free En-

terprise Forum, recently commented: "How many "Now Hiring" signs did you see today? Demand currently exceeds supply across many Charlottesville job categories. When you see signing, and retention bonuses offered to school bus drivers (and others), you begin to understand the scale of disconnect between the market and available labor."

Many local businesses are rising to the challenge with creativity, and they are more sensitive to the flexibility needed by many workers. Indeed some of these changes will become standard, which will help fill those job openings and hopefully expand productivity to build a more robust economy.

Chamber board member Christy Phillips is the Chief Talent Officer for WillowTree, Inc. She shared some insights with me:

"WillowTree is reinventing the way our teams work. Prior to Covid most of our teams were co-located in one of our locations and worked together in collaborative spaces in our offices. Although most people have been working remotely since March 2020, our offices are open and many people still come in. Covid has fundamentally changed the way people in the tech industry want to work, and WillowTree is adapting our approach accordingly. Many people will still come into the office 2-3 days a week, but that time in the office will center around collaboration, learning, and community building. Other people will work mostly remote but will come together quarterly to spend time together. I'm sure we will adjust as we learn what works well and what needs to change. We have all learned that we can effectively get the work done remotely, but connection and community building are so important to a healthy company culture. I think we can find the right balance to meet all of those needs."

Another standout in our business community, Ting, also has adapted. Kara Chandeysson, Ting City Manager shares, "While the pandemic has shifted the way we live day-to-day, the Ting team has seen a tremendous spike in demand for reliable internet as people spend more and more time at home. To meet this growing interest, we've ramped up hiring, with open roles in everything from marketing to field technicians. However, while demand is as strong as ever, finding new employees in Charlottesville has been challenging. This trend is something that we've seen in all of our Ting Towns across the



From the Desk of **Elizabeth Cromwell**
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country, and something that our industry has faced for nearly a year. At Ting, we're proud to offer strong work-life balance, a remote-first model, and competitive benefits for our employees, which we trust will be key incentives for prospective talent."

"Recruitment (& retention) of talent is a significant challenge and focus for all of our organizations," stated Board Chair Guy Browning, MPS Macmillan. He conducted a brief, informal survey of associates and business contacts up and down the East Coast and confirmed this is a widespread, prevailing issue. "It is not limited to specialist positions; it is also affecting entry-level and less skilled labor. Demand has increased or re-awakened as a society and the economy open back up. At the same time, a large number of people have left the workforce."

More than ever, Browning expressed, "Organizations will need to be at the top of their game to differentiate themselves to attract and retain talent. It is increasingly essential to reward, value, and treat your (our?) employees well to maintain or improve the likelihood of attracting enough talent to drive our organizations forward."

The intense disruption in our local business community has been devastating in many ways. But there are some real reasons to cheer as well. As businesses and workers evolve in ways we never thought possible, good ideas transform into new industries, and previously inaccessible opportunities open up to a broader population.

At the Chamber, we convene our members to share ideas, ask and receive help, and partner whenever possible. We are proud of the tenacity, ingenuity, and roll-up-your-sleeves sweat equity our businesses (both legacy and in infancy) demonstrate to build a vibrant community every day.

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The Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce advocates, convenes, and engages to strengthen business in the greater Charlottesville Region.