



Data-Driven Development

Delaware Workforce Development Board issues study to better understand workforce needs **BY BRAD ZUBER**

DELAWARE FACES STIFF COMPETITION in attracting businesses to the state, and success hinges on having the skilled workforce that new and existing employers need. Indicative of the challenges we face is that the number of jobs employers need to fill is significantly greater than the number of available individuals with the right skills and experience. Playing an increasing role in plugging that gap is the Delaware Workforce Development Board.

The 53-member Board was established in its current form by a 2020 executive order signed by Governor John Carney. Its membership is comprised of elected officials, state agency and department heads, members from the private sector, and representatives from the state’s labor community. It is, of course, a large board and no doubt filled with diverse viewpoints, but the focus remains on enhancing Delaware’s workforce via the following approaches:

- Vetting and then investing in workforce training programs that build the skills required for today’s employment world;
- Interacting with businesses to ensure the right skills are being targeted; and
- Enhancing tools to link individuals with potential employers.

While not a household name for most Delawareans, the Board has certainly been active. When Scott Malfitano became chair last August, his focus was building on the Board’s many successes but, as importantly, working across the state to broaden the Board’s impact. As Malfitano notes, “the demand for jobs and competition within our region has changed over the past two years. Our board looks to increase our effectiveness and impact through new initiatives.”

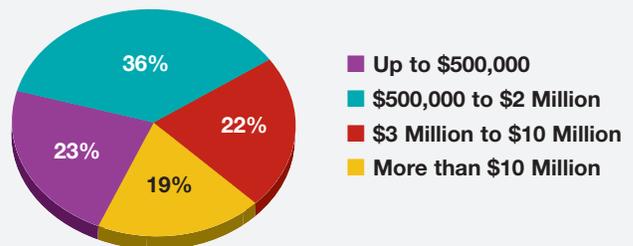
Malfitano and Joanna Staib, who became executive director last September, can point to a number of recent improvements. The Board has a broader statewide representation. It has increased its focus on data transparency by ensuring businesses are aware of the available programs and candidly evaluating the success of each. With the establishment of a business engagement committee, the Board is better able to understand the changing marketplace and work to adapt programs to those changes. Related to the committee is an investment in a temporary network of business engagement liaisons to—in the Board’s words—“engage businesses in the process... to understand their business hiring needs and jobs available in Delaware, to provide input into training programs, and to expedite the hiring process for the unemployed/underemployed.” Another

enhancement is an effort to ingrain the concept of return on investment (ROI) into the Board’s conversations, budget, and program evaluations. The focus is on what works, but as Malfitano says, “the best measure of ROI is a job at the end of training.”

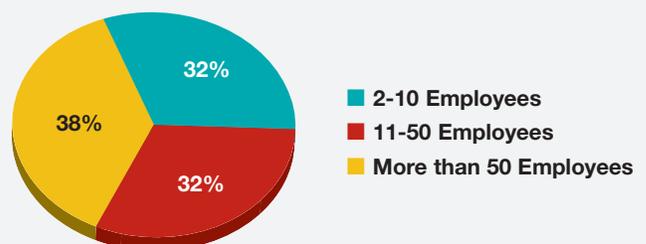
A more recent step was the Board’s decision to turn to Zogby Analytics for a comprehensive survey of Delaware’s business decisionmakers. It is a significant effort, but as Staib explains, “understanding the employment marketplace helps the Board ensure its resources are used in the most effective way. The more we understand what employers want, the better we can help individuals become employees.” In short, it’s another element of the focus on ROI.

The survey is representative of the Board’s innovation, or as Jonathan Zogby, CEO of Zogby Analytics, notes, “It was forward thinking of Delaware’s Workforce Development Board to utilize advanced survey research methodologies to better understand Delaware businesses’ current needs.” He adds, “Zogby Analytics, in conjunction with the Board,

Surveyed Respondents: By Revenue



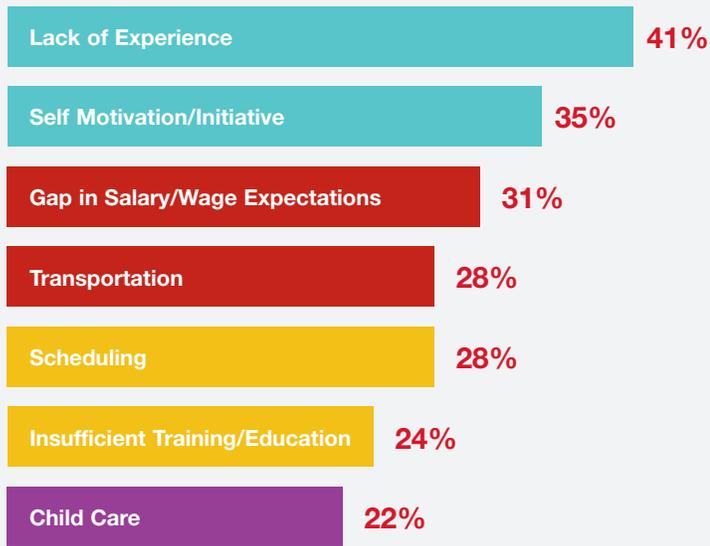
Surveyed Respondents: By # of Employees



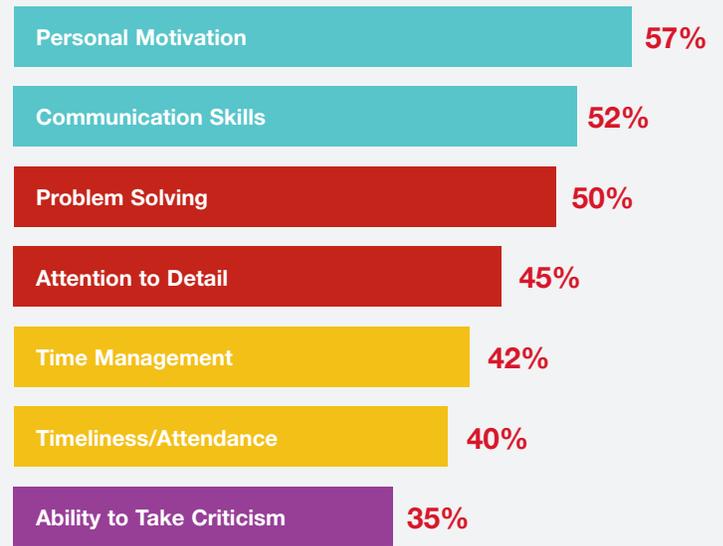
Source: Preliminary Survey Results – Zogby Analytics.

Education & Upskilling

Issues Cited: Barriers to Hiring



Issues Cited: Among Job Applicants and New Employees



Source: Preliminary Survey Results – Zogby Analytics.

produced a hybrid methodology of online and telephone samples to reach a large and well-balanced sample of businesses.”

Although the survey is still in process, over 250 business decisionmakers have been interviewed and Malfitano, Staib, and the Board are already sorting through the available data. A cross section of industries were represented, meeting the Board’s goal of an even distribution among employers of all sizes based on both number of employees and revenue.

The preliminary survey reveals critical barriers to hiring, with 40 percent of employers citing a lack of experience, and relatedly, 24 percent citing insufficient training and education (respondents could select multiple barriers). A lack of self-motivation/initiative was cited by 35 percent of respondents.

“The more we understand what employers want, the better we can help individuals become employees.”

— Joanna Staib, Executive Director,
Delaware Workforce Development Board

Respondents also noted a number of gaps exhibited by potential hires and new employees (again, respondents could choose multiple responses). Lack of motivation was cited here as well, this time by 60 percent of respondents, an outcome Malfitano and Staib called “certainly one of the most difficult to address.” About half of respondents cited issues with communication skills or a lack of problem solving/critical thinking. At least 40 percent cited deficiencies in the following areas: time management, timeliness/attendance, and attention to detail.

The world in general and many employment opportunities in particular continue to be more technology-focused so Zogby drilled down into

specific gaps in technical competencies. Respondents most often cited a lack of proficiency in Excel, Word, virtual meeting technology, data analysis, and IT networking.

The range of issues cited by respondents is quite broad, and some are more easily addressed than others. A lack of experience and insufficient training seem to fit perfectly with the Board’s mandate and it is possible that, for many, issues with communication skills and time-management will decrease as experience and training increase.

The survey also touched on the various channels used in recruitment efforts. Asked to select just one response, 40 percent of respondents cited “word of mouth, networking through current employees, referrals” as the “most useful,” with the online job-source tool, Indeed, at 20 percent. But reliance on word of mouth, networking, and referrals—while certainly excellent options—runs the risk of completely missing a broad segment of the potential workforce.

Two additional findings should be noted. There is an opportunity to increase the proportion of businesses willing to employ individuals who have been part of the criminal justice system. Doing so would expand the population of potential hires. More than 80 percent of respondents offered employment opportunities that do not require a college degree, which is significant given the climbing cost of college.

Such knowledge will be critical as the Board and other state decisionmakers work to ensure an effective and targeted use of the \$50 million Governor Carney has dedicated to workforce development under the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act.

The Zogby effort reinforces the Board’s focus on listening to businesses, but Malfitano and Staib stress it is really just the start of what the Board plans as its ongoing efforts to enhance, in the words of Governor Carney’s Executive Order, the “development and continuous improvement of the workforce development systems in the state” and the “identification and dissemination of best practices.” ■