



## Connecting the Disconnected: A Different Perspective on Addressing Workforce Challenges in 2022 and Beyond

*The Business News Online -- contributed commentary by Matt Valiquette, Executive Director, Bay Area Workforce Development Board, submitted 12/08/21.*

While Wisconsin's economy continues to bounce back and rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a number of indicators that are promising while others are deeply concerning. On the positive side, at the time of this writing, average WI State unemployment rates are near or below pre-pandemic levels (3.6%) and indicate the overwhelming majority of individuals who experienced job loss during the pandemic have returned to the workforce.

Additionally, the percentage of Wisconsinites actively participating in the workforce has risen slightly, which supports the recovering UI rate data. At approximately 66.5%, Wisconsin ranks well above the national average for the percentage of individuals within the working age range (16-65 years old) actively participating in the workforce.

But both datapoints cited above can also be interpreted as troubling, particularly if you are an employer needing to hire talent. The low UI rate represents a numerically small number of individuals likely to return to the workforce as compared to the number of open positions currently available. Some research indicates if every single working-age person in the State of Wisconsin was employed, a significant number of positions would remain unfilled. Where will this worker shortage/talent-deficit come from?

The high-demand industries (transportation, construction, advanced manufacturing, information technology, and healthcare) drive much of Wisconsin's economy (certainly the case in Northeast Wisconsin). All of these industries and the majority of the thousands of employers within these driver-industries continue to search for talent to replace retiring baby-boomers and grow their businesses. The demand for their services and products continues to grow and the most often cited cause for concern and challenge to growth remains squarely centered on the workforce – the need for talent.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated and exacerbated the skills and labor shortages, but this trend was identified many years ago. Some companies have increased investments in automation to bridge workforce gaps, while other companies have adopted innovative employee-centric strategies to attract and retain talent and/or altered business models, while others sadly were forced to shutter due to workforce shortages.

Quite simply, if we (employers, schools, municipalities, staffing/temporary placement agencies, workforce development partners, etc.) continue to utilize the same means to search in the same places for the same talent, the results will likely be disappointingly the same. What is needed are equity-driven initiatives designed to attract specific Wisconsin populations that are identified as chronically unemployed or marginally employed and historically disconnected from many of the services, programs, and strategies designed to assist folks reenter the workforce or improve their current employment situation. The most viable workforce development solutions must incorporate strategies specially tailored and designed to support and promote greater equity, diversity, and inclusion. Providing more meaningful and tangibly valuable services and resources to our communities' people of color, English language learners, returning citizens (formerly criminal justice involved), people with disabilities, and veterans presents an exciting opportunity for employers, career seekers, and our Wisconsin economy and communities. "People can't be what they can't see."

Collaborating with uniquely connected organizations (Abaxent, Casa Alba, COMSA, The Joseph Project, We All Rise, Tribal entities, Hmong groups, certain churches and faith-based organizations, etc.) may generate the synergy and networks necessary to access the 'opportunity talent' residing in these under-served and under-represented populations.