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Manatee, Sarasota job markets improving but companies scramble to find right

Technology, skill gaps have employers scrambling

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Larry Thompson moderates a panel of area business leaders in a discussion on best practices for hiring, training and retaining skilled workers during the annual Suncoast Workforce meeting Thursday at the Lakewood Ranch Golf & Country Club. Sitting on the panel are: Sharon Hillstrom, president Manatee Economic Development Corporation; Mark Huey, president and CEO, Economic Development Corporation of Sarasota County; Steve Knopik, CEO Bealls Inc.; Jan Roberts, Economic Development, PepsiCo, North America; and Pete Wozniak, CEO/Administrator Venice Regional Medical Centers. GRANT JEFFERIES/Bradenton Herald

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Challenges face companies and job seekers

By JOSH SALMAN — jsalman@bradenton.com

LAKEWOOD RANCH -- A panel of employers said Thursday the only constant in Southwest Florida's post-recession job market is change.

From technology advancements to skill gaps, companies are scrambling to find the right fit for their workforce even as the unemployment rate remains historically high.

No matter the industry, employers can be more selective -- leaving displaced laborers now needing more help than ever to land a new position.

The challenges facing companies and job seekers alike were discussed as part of the Suncoast Workforce annual meeting Thursday at the Lakewood Ranch Golf and Country Club.

With a panel representing sectors from retail to manufacturing and health care, the group stressed the importance of proper training for candidates to stick out in highly competitive job hunts.

"There's dozens of decision-making variables (for target employers)," said Mark Huey, president and CEO of the Sarasota Economic Development Corp. "The one that has gone to the top like a rocket is workforce. We have seen that become a key economic driver."

Huey and the remaining panel touted the job placement efforts Thursday of Suncoast Workforce, one of the two dozen regional agencies under the state umbrella tasked with employment help.

During the past year,

Suncoast has served about 125,000 customers through its three employment centers between Manatee and Sarasota.

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Although the region's jobless mark has made strides during that time, the 28,125 unemployed between Manatee and Sarasota left a cumulative 9.3 percent unemployment rate in July, records show.

And the 200 some business leaders attending Thursday's event know there's still work to do.

One of the biggest challenges on the forefront remains technology, which is changing the needs of employers and now has become a top qualification in recruiting.

"Technology is affecting every single sector, we hear it everyday," said Sharon Hillstrom, president and CEO of the Manatee Economic Development Corp. "For manufacturing that means there's less jobs, but the jobs are higher-skill and higher-wage. We need to prepare our workforce so they're able and willing to go to work for those companies."

Another setback contributing to the unemployment ranks is a skills gap that current exists between the positions employers are seeking to fill and the qualifications of the unemployed.

That's most evident in manufacturing, where manual line production no longer remains a priority.

Many of the new laborers now entering the workforce don't have the flexibility to fit that mold, said Jan Roberts, economic development director for PepsiCo of North America, which employs 7,500 workers in Florida.

"New candidates out of school these days just aren't flexible," Roberts said. "They don't like to work night shifts or weekends. They don't want to get dusty, and that's not conducive to manufacturing."

Also on Thursday, the Suncoast Workforce recognized outgoing board members and presented Sarasota County Commissioner Carolyn Mason with the 2012 Leadership Award.

Josh Salman, Herald business writer, can be reached at 941-745-7095. Follow him on Twitter @JoshSalman

[Back to Top](#)
[< Previous Story](#)

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[Next Story >](#)



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