

Relationships to Results:

Advancing Workforce and Economic Development Through Collaboration

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Introduction

Relationships play a vital role in personal and professional lives - some will grow and others will die out. The important part in building these relationships in government is being true and honest. In today's political climate, economic development officials are sometimes tied into what is going on globally or nationally; however, most of the day-to-day work is strictly tied to local government. Trust is something built over time. It is the vital part of building lasting relationships. Economic development officials must be genuine in every interaction, whether with public or private clients.

Relationships can have a lasting impact on everything in economic development. This capstone project outlines how those relationships affect workforce. When thinking about workforce it is easy to think about those currently working, but what about the future generation? Can and will the current students graduating from high school and college contribute to the workforce? The answer is yes and gaining access to that workforce early can be transformational. This project dived into the Goodlettsville workforce and how the local relationships that the Goodlettsville Economic Development team established, with the businesses and schools, could be used to showcase jobs in Goodlettsville. This project also allowed the local schools and businesses to create relationships. The main objective was to show students the jobs that are available locally and how those students need to go about applying for those jobs.

What Relationships

When taking over economic development for the City of Goodlettsville in the fall of 2024, building relationships was a top priority. This was a top priority because there were several new people in new positions with the city and with some of the local businesses. Identifying

relationships would end up being the easy part, but building them has slowly evolved. Most of the time the economic development department is the first point of contact for some of these businesses or their representatives. That first impression is important and really sets up everything going forward.

When taking on a new position or new job in professional life, one gets the opportunity to build new relationships. Experience working in different government departments can provide insight and show the importance of relationships and collaboration. Relationships are important internally and externally depending on the project and its goals. Collaboration is part of building successful, productive relationships.

Many times, there will be a project that requires collaboration with peers in government and the private sector. Sometimes there is an opportunity to bring those past connections along and collaborate again on future projects. It is enjoyable and fulfilling to get the opportunity to work together on a second or third project with a past connection.

Cultivating relationships is also critical when working with the private sector. Most of the time, governments are bound by certain requirements that are not cost effective or time effective, whereas the private sector has more flexibility. Flexibility from the private sector can sometimes get a task or project completed quickly and effectively. That is why those relationships are invaluable and beneficial when something falls outside the purview of government. People love to talk about their experiences good and bad. Their word of mouth can make or break important deals, relationships, and reputations in the economic development industry.

Understanding Goodlettsville Businesses

Most of the business owners, plant managers, and business managers are spread thin on time, consequently making the most of that limited time is important when working with them. It is also important that they do not view the time working with them as wasted. There is success in being intentional and assuring focus is on the goal of the meeting, providing quality service, and not wasting time.

When it comes to workforce, the larger businesses tend to have several people that they must report to and certain goals or criteria that they must meet. Businesses may also contract with a third-party hiring agency that manages their workforce. Smaller businesses sometimes find themselves at a disadvantage to the larger businesses because they cannot afford a hiring agency. Additionally, they sometimes have financial limitations in offering competitive benefits. During site visits with smaller businesses, Goodlettsville Economic Development witnessed some of them holding onto hope that people would walk through the door looking for employment with little effort on the part of the business.

The site visits that the team conducted consisted of a pop in and introduction with some of them being a more formally-scheduled meeting. There was no previous model to go from, so the team was building it as it progressed. The site visit's goal and intentions are for the businesses to know who the point of contact is and how they can get involved if interested. Site visits also helped the team learn which businesses have a great culture centered around the workers that helps them attract and retain good employees – another example of where word of mouth is important. These businesses make employees feel like the priority instead of making them feel like they are secondary to a race against time or numbers.

One hurdle the team encountered with local businesses is the thought that people do not want to work today. That thought process seems to be tied more to the younger generations.

Experience has shown that the problem is not always that people do not want to work, rather it is because the business is not always looking in the right place, thinking outside the box, or looking at their pay and benefits compared to their competitors. The younger generations may have a different outlook on work and life and how those two converge. While there is nothing that an economic development organization (EDO) can directly do about the culture at a private business, it can assist the company about understanding today's workforce, expectations on culture, and competitive pay rates. This is where the team in Goodlettsville had to think outside the box about workforce.

During the Managing Economic Development Course, Dr. Macel Ely covered the different generations in the workforce. Dr. Ely also explained how those different generations view their jobs and personal lives. Dr. Ely also covered what motivated the younger generation and how to work with those generations. Dr. Ely's session was followed by the first planning session for Industry Day, which is highlighted later in this capstone. His information provided many "aha" moments and kept focus on the next generation. In Dr. Ely's closing he said, "Take a deep appreciation for each generation and what each brings to the workplace." That quote is exactly what would end up helping the Industry Alliance create an industry day.

After evaluating long-established business relationships in Goodlettsville and ones the team needed to establish, the team concluded that there needed to be a connection point among all businesses. When making these connections it is very important to build that trust and show a high level of personal investment to them. The only way to build trust is over time and do what you say when you say you're going to do it. Most of these companies have very little extra time so being prompt and mindful of their time helps with trust as well. An EDO must go beyond

noting a list of a business's main points of contact in a database. Those contacts may end up being meaningless if there is no cultivated relationship to prove as a value add.

It can be easy for those in economic development roles to get tied up on the business-success side and overlook the importance of the personal-connection side. In the urgency to find an answer, meet a deadline, or solve a problem, people sometimes forget to check on that person and simply follow up. As an economic development professional, it is important to take time to go around and make introductions. This time will also provide an opportunity to explain what economic development is and how the department can come assist their business. Some may view that as the old-fashioned way, which is not necessarily the wrong way, it just depends on that person.

The other option for building relationships is bringing everyone together in one room to show appreciation and share experiences. This way, the individual business contacts may realize they are not alone in the challenges they encounter. This idea of a group gathering that could flourish into something more became the Goodlettsville Industry Alliance, an opportunity for everyone to collaborate and flourish into something more.

Developing and Establishing Relationships

The Goodlettsville Industry Alliance started with a concept that would bring all "industrial" partners together for a quarterly meeting. The only drawback to that was that Goodlettsville does not have many "industrial" businesses. The team decided to bring in other businesses that aren't "industrial" but are larger employers including Dollar General Headquarters and others in the business world.

The team started identifying these businesses by attending chamber events and relying on the City Manager and past Economic Development Director and the connections they had established. Participating in Leadership Goodlettsville provided access to some of the businesses that may have never heard about Economic Development. The next step was making site visits to introduce what Economic Development is and what organizations are responsible for it. This approach provided a more personal touch where everyone could put a name with a person. Those site visits are still incorporated today. The team has enhanced them by adding another touch point by sending handwritten notes in the mail after any meetings. Handwritten notes may sound like an outdated way of reaching someone, but it shows appreciation for their time and adds, again, a more personal touch.

Mike Miguel, Branch Manager with Prevost, had this to say about the evolution of his relationship with Goodlettsville Economic Development, “We basically went from little to no relationship to a full-blown partnership. We try to include the city in anything that we do, and they do the same with us. It’s very unique the relationship that we have because in talking to some of our other locations they have let me know that none of them have any type of relationship with their city other than paying taxes. I am very grateful that Alex reached out to us from the city to start the relationship and it has grown into relationships with other sections of the city, especially with the chamber. We are proud to be a part of this city, and we have been welcomed in a way that was so unexpected and we feel we are wanted here.”

The hardest part of the entire relationship building campaign was those businesses that for whatever reason felt left out or unheard. Government EDOs do not always have a large staff and cannot be everywhere all the time. The goal is for a business to know where to go if it is an emergency or if they simply need to get information or vent about their workforce pains. The

relationship with the business is a partnership requiring collaboration, not just a one-sided affair. The team must build relationships around that understanding.

Developing the Goodlettsville Industry Alliance

After several months of working and growing new relationships, the first Industry Alliance Meeting was scheduled. The invitation was very broad and captured several top officials from industrial/manufacturing, hotels, and local businesses. The invitation was to a broad group to gauge their interest in a meeting like this and get feedback. Since the first meeting, there was a core group of attendees regularly attending and engaging. Now there is a core group of forty businesses and government officials who attend regularly and engage their counterparts in the businesses.

The main goal of this alliance experiment was to build relationships, get feedback from businesses, and provide any assistance where possible. The feedback was hearing what the businesses had to say about struggles and accomplishments. The assistance piece was providing any help or guidance with any issue or struggle that those businesses might be experiencing. This is the reason for bringing in government officials so they are there to listen and provide feedback.

The experiment proved successful. The alliance meetings still revolve around the businesses and are now adding guest speakers who provide a benefit. These guest speakers have industry knowledge and can also assist the businesses if needed. They include speakers from several of the State offices, Tennessee College of Applied Technologies (TCATs,) and a marketing firm. The meetings have now periodically moved to being onsite at a highlighted business. This gives an opportunity for the host business to give a tour of their facility and day-

to-day operations. This would also give all the businesses an opportunity to create partnerships with each other.

Jason Ambrose, Senior Manager with XPO, had this to say about the alliance group, “The biggest impact has been visibility. When industry and city leaders understand each other’s constraints, priorities and capabilities, decisions become more practical and outcomes improve.”

Amanda Sutton with Des-Case Human Resource office stated the following about the Industry Alliance, “The Industry Alliance has been an excellent way for Des-Case to connect with peer companies that share similar operational models and priorities. These meetings provide a forum to collaborate, exchange ideas, and tackle common challenges—both as partners and as peers. They’ve also helped us identify local opportunities specific to industrial businesses and strengthened our ties with the City of Goodlettsville. While broader groups like the Chamber of Commerce are valuable, the Industry Alliance’s focused network has been especially useful for practical, industry-specific collaboration”.

Evaluating the Current Workforce

One of the first meetings had guest speakers from TCAT talk about the programs that they offer. They also talked about partnerships and how they can create classes or certifications around industry needs. That meeting was well attended and sparked a conversation revolving around the next generation of workforce. From those open discussions at this meeting the focus shifted to the workforce and helping those businesses. Those businesses all showed interest in what the schools had to offer by just hearing what TCAT had to offer.

The lack of available workforce was not a complete shock since this is not just a local problem, but a national problem. Now that workforce was one of the key items needing attention,

the next step was determining weak links in successful workforce attraction. What was surprising was that several of the businesses that would be viewed as “factories” or “line work” were the ones looking for a more technical workforce.

Goodlettsville Economic Development had the task of determining how to bring together businesses and local schools with a shared understanding of the true job or workforce need.

Goodlettsville Economic Development started doing workforce evaluations asking businesses a series of questions. These questions revolved around where and how schools can help:

- What are the current understaffed jobs?
- What does it currently look like when conducting hiring and job recruitment?
- Has there been consideration from any local schools to assist in workforce development?

During this evaluation period, the team found a trend that Goodlettsville has a very diverse workforce and a workforce that travels long distances. Tyson, the largest employer by people on site, hires a majority of its workforce from outside the local zip code. Tyson was not in need of line workers, rather they needed help hiring more mechatronics employees to do repairs on the line. Most of the jobs at facilities like Tyson need some level of technical knowledge or specific training. Most of the local companies having trouble finding necessary talent are now hiring someone they can train on-the-job.

Once those relationships were built with businesses and getting feedback about their workforce, the question became, “What can the Goodlettsville Economic Development Department do about workforce?” The team knew from information gathering that mass hiring of workforce was not the ask from these businesses. The issue was more of a specific trade

workforce that covered several skills like graphic design, engineers (mechanical and electrical), welding, mechanics, and mechatronics just to mention a few. This is where the idea of an industry day sprouted.

Creating Industry Day

Industry Day is all about the local students and highlighting the jobs available in the city, introducing them to jobs they may not have known or had misperceptions about. The day is also about building relationships between the local businesses and the school systems. This event gives the school systems an opportunity to showcase the classes they offer and to show that most of the specific trades the businesses seek are taught in local schools at some level. It opened a line of communication between the local businesses and these local schools, creating more relationships.

The idea was to then partner with Sumner County Schools, Davidson County Schools, Volunteer State Community College, and Nashville State Community College. The ask to these schools and colleges would be to send their students to tour business facilities in Goodlettsville and hear from leaders at those facilities. Until this effort, there was not a consistent or even existing relationship with any of these schools or colleges.

The team's office meetings with the Industry Alliance found that offering something like an Industry Day provided ways to achieve four goals.

1. The Economic Development Department would gain access to make a connection.
2. The businesses would have an opportunity to make connections.

3. The schools would have something else to offer to the students and get the students exposed to local jobs.
4. It would bring together more than thirty people, from City Officials, Business Leaders, and Teachers partnering together for one common goal.

These connections and partnerships would create a workforce development pipeline and give students local options for employment post-graduation. Over several months, conversations started with all the schools and colleges mentioned. Sumner County Schools was the only participant for industry day this year. However, they sent more than 160 students and staff. Fields of study covered during the process included engineering, construction, mechatronics, automotive, welding, marketing, and digital arts. The digital arts class had the opportunity to design the t-shirts that were handed out during the event.

For a community the size of Goodlettsville, the students and teachers were impressed by the different jobs offered locally. The collective group of businesses and city officials were also blown away by the participation numbers as well. Chase Moore the Director of CTE and Innovation with Sumner County Schools had this to say about industry Day “Thank you all so much for taking the time to plan engaging experiences, sponsor food and t-shirts, and host students last week for Goodlettsville industrial Day! I heard so much great feedback from the students and teachers about what they saw and heard. They really had no idea there were so many great employment opportunities in Goodlettsville.” It was great to see a city this size pull together and showcase the city. This could have only been done through partnerships and collaboration.

The relationships that have been built with all the local schools, universities, businesses, and industrial businesses have been vital in what Goodlettsville Economic Development does

every day. More city staff members will be invited to these meetings so that they can make those relationships. Very rarely has there been a project or a problem that does not require most, if not all the departments in the city, collaborating. This also goes for the private utility districts in the city with both water and electricity.

One of the businesses that is a partner is XPO, a logistics company located just outside the city limits. It is still vital to include them even though they are not within corporate limits. This company is still pulling from the same workforce, using the city streets, and city police and fire department to respond to their emergency needs. Jason Ambrose is the Senior Manager at XPO and when asked about the relationship with the city over the last two years he said, “The relationship has moved from transactional to collaborative. We’re no longer only reaching out when there is a problem, we’re working together before problems occur”. Jason also had this to say when asked about workforce efforts, “These relationships have created trust and trust speeds everything up, decisions, coordination and workforce initiatives.”

Expanding Programs

One of the next initiatives will be having these schools bring students that are interested in local government, construction, or utilities. This will be in addition to what is already incorporated in the current Industry Day. The goal is for this workforce model to grow and transform every year by adding something new. Future plans will also not be tied to one single day, but will include multiple days and possibly months. There will also be an expansion of the Industry Day Alliance both in participants and offerings. The goal is to add five new businesses this year and host an appreciation day for the local businesses. There will also be surveys sent to participating businesses requesting feedback about how to assist them over the next year. That feedback will be implemented over the coming years and the best part about the alliance group is

the flexibility to change and mold it into whatever is needed at the time. It is becoming just a group of friends getting together quarterly to help each other be the best Goodlettsville.

Into the Future

Other goals in the coming years are expanding the industry day and opening it up to more students. Goodlettsville is located in two public school districts - Sumner and Davidson County Schools. This is unique and an advantage because it provides access to several thousand students.

The process for the 2026 Industry Day and Teach the Teacher Day are in the planning phase. Teach the Teacher Day came from feedback received from Sumner County Schools and those businesses that participated in Industry Day. The goal is to host teachers a few weeks before they bring their students. This provides a better understanding of the businesses that they will visit. It gets teachers engaged and builds relationships with those businesses.

Another goal for this event is to start seeing students getting hired locally or doing some internships at these businesses. The local schools are a great resource and are looking for ways to help place students where they are interested. They are looking for partnerships with the local businesses on all the programs that they offer. This school initiative will continue and grow, hopefully inspiring students and growing relationships.

The Industry Alliance and relationships that have been built from it can be summed up with one simple statement that captures it all, "Be Together." One thing that is never taken for granted is that the Economic Development department would not be anything without these businesses. The businesses pay the taxes that fund the department and those businesses go above and beyond to host or support community events with their own time and money. The business

community helps set the identity and standards for the city. If the businesses succeed, then the city will succeed and if they are failing, then the city will fail.

Not all relationships have to be about what is in it for them specifically, but more of what is in it for everyone. This is what makes relationship building so important. The trickle-down effect will be transformational if the city remembers that these are all people first and businesses second. Relationships are key in every aspect of economic development and have proven that they can lead to solutions for today's workforce and for building the next generation of workers.

Resources:

Mike Miguel, Branch Manager, Prevost

Jason Ambrose, Senior Manager, XPO Service Center

Amanda Sutton, Human Resource, Des-Case

Chase Moore, Director of CTE and Innovation, Sumner County Schools



2025 Industry Day Opening Remarks