

Chatham County Workforce Development Analysis

Prepared by the

**Armstrong Atlantic State University
Center for Regional Analysis**

In Cooperation with the

Armstrong Public Service Center

On Behalf of

**Savannah Economic Development Authority
Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Inc.
United Way of the Coastal Empire**

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**United Way
of the Coastal Empire**



FOREWORD

This workforce development report was produced by the Armstrong Center for Regional Analysis in cooperation with the Armstrong Public Service Center on behalf of the Savannah Economic Development Authority (SEDA), the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Inc., and the United Way of the Coastal Empire. We thank the leadership team of Trip Tollison, Bill Hubbard, and Gregg Schroeder, respectively, of SEDA, the Chamber, and the United Way.

Dan Howard provided expertise in conducting interviews with human resource professionals, analysis of survey data, and editing. Erika Tate (of *blueknowledge LLC*) provided expertise with conducting focus groups and analyzing data thereby gathered. Thanks are also due to Savannah Technical College, the cooperation and support of which facilitated the focus group research.

The report could not have been completed without valuable input from numerous human resource and workforce development professionals in Chatham County.

The following Armstrong personnel played valuable roles and contributed their expertise in the production of the report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to develop an accurate, up-to-date body of knowledge regarding the current state of conditions in the Chatham County labor market. In particular, there was a strong desire to assess the quality of the county workforce from the perspective of human resource professionals, and to methodically consider the role of so-called “barriers” to meaningful employment that could inhibit entry, professional development, and advancement in the workforce.

There was an emphasis, but not an exclusive focus, on entry-level positions. These positions are the first steps that individuals would take into the world of the professional workplace. Entry-level positions are defined as those requiring, at a minimum, high school or equivalent education, and at a maximum, an associate’s degree or a post-secondary school credential. In terms of lifting individuals out of poverty in the county learning about challenges and successes in filling these entry-level positions are considered crucial to the long-term well-being of the county economy and the persons, businesses, and organizations that populate it.

Four tasks were undertaken to achieve the goals described.

- First, background research was conducted to guide the direction of the inquiry, assess whether the Chatham County experience with barriers was comparable to that elsewhere, and to provide a set of resources useful in addressing problems associated with barriers.
- Second, a survey of human resource professionals was conducted to learn about challenges faced in recruiting and retaining entry level workers, to obtain an assessment of the quality of the county workforce along various attributes, and to learn of successes in recruiting and retaining entry level workers.
- Third, personal interviews with human resource professionals were conducted to learn more about successes and challenges in attracting qualified entry-level workers. The nature of the personal interaction during the interviews allowed the development of better understanding of the issues faced by human resource professionals.
- Fourth, focus group research was conducted with job-seekers and employers to delve more deeply into barriers to meaningful employment. Representatives of small businesses in Chatham County shared their perspective along with job-seekers. Job-seekers were divided into two groups: those enrolled in training programs at Savannah Technical College, and those based in community resource centers in low income, high poverty neighborhoods in Savannah. These conversations allowed the perspective of small business employers and job-seekers to inform the findings reflected in the survey and interviews with human resource professionals.

Key findings are described next.

Key Findings

Survey of Human Resource Professionals (90 complete responses)

Quality of Chatham County Workforce

- There was less satisfaction with the workforce's ability in: writing skills, business etiquette, oral communication, and math skills.
- Among those most dissatisfied with the workforce, the most commonly cited skills sets needed were for better or more: computer skills, forklift operators, welders, and machinists.

Entry-Level Applicant Pool

HR professionals expressed the following:

- 63% agreed they hired a qualified applicant
- 57% agreed they would train the "right person" if applicant lacked appropriate certification/educ.
- 45% agreed that local applicants do not have the skills needed for the industry or company
- 35% agreed that applicants possess the specific skills needed for the job

HR Search Behavior

- Approximately 12 entry-level openings per 100 employees are expected within 12 months.
 - 81% require a high school education (69%) or less (12%)
 - 24% require a specific certification
- 72% search outside Chatham County for workers
- 28% contact a workforce development agency/program
 - 5% of applicants were associated with a workforce development agency
- 70% of positions are successfully filled
 - 31% filled by applicants from outside Chatham County

Applicants and Screens

- 29 (median) applications were received for each entry-level position
- 25% of applicants met preferred criteria
- 35% of applicants passed the first round of screening
- 81% of applicants with a misdemeanor record remained eligible for the position

Screen Failure Rates

- 12% failed a credit check: administered by 30% of firms
- 17% failed a drug screen: administered by 85% of firms
- 20% failed a background check: administered by 91% of firms

Barriers

- 57% agreed applicants lack enough formal education
- 27% of firms were not accessible by public transportation
- 21% agreed applicants have language barriers
- 20% of HR representatives agreed applicants lack adequate transportation
 - 2% of firms provided assistance for transportation
- 9% of firms provided assistance with child care

Interviews of Human Resource Professionals (20 interviews)

- Expressed that higher wages offered resulted in better recruiting success
- Expressed that automated/computer screening systems would reduce recruiting success
- Impression of Chatham County Workforce:
40% positive, 30% neutral, 30% negative
- Experienced lower failure rates with screens (compared to the survey)
drug screen: 7% credit check: 9% background check : 11%
- Had little knowledge of existing community supports for entry-level workers

• Characteristics of Ideal Candidates (for entry-level positions), frequency wanting...

<p>Work Experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 85% specific job experience - 45% general work history 	<p>Soft Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 65% customer service skills - 55% communication skills (w/coworkers) - 50% teamwork - 45% business etiquette 	<p>Job Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 45% attention to detail - 30% problem-solving - 30% computer skills
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• Challenges Preventing Hiring of Ideal Candidates: Percent citing...

81% Problems with Labor Supply (Applicants): Percent citing...

<p>Attitude:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 55% generational differences in attitudes • 45% work ethic 	<p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60% verbal skills • 45% business etiquette • 40% poor high school education 	<p>Barriers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40% work experience • 25% transportation
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19% Problems with Labor Demand (Hiring Process or Job Characteristics): Percent citing...

<p>Job Characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45% Low Pay • 15% Lack of advancement opportunities 	<p>Hiring Systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% checklist approach to candidate selection • 15% over-reliance on HR computer systems
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• Successes in Hiring Ideal Candidates: Percent citing...

4% Successes with Labor Supply (Applicants)

Military experience among applicants

96% Successes with Labor Demand (Hiring Processes/Job Characteristics): Percent citing...

<p>Job Characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% higher pay • 45% in-house advancement opportunities • 40% consistent/clear work standards 	<p>Hiring Systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45% in-depth interviewing • 35% willing to train “right person” • 35% word-of-mouth recruiting • 35% link to college training program
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• Existing Supports for Entry-Level Workers

- 90% in-house job training
- 50% computer-based training programs
- 30% tuition reimbursement
- 25% soft skills training

Desired Supports for Entry-Level Workers

- 45% high school work-readiness training
- 30% high school skills training
- 25% better job fairs
- 15% day-care availability

Focus Group Research (6 Focus Groups, 55 participants)

- Labor Supply Focus Groups (43 Job-Seekers)
 - Expressed desire for job responsibility and ability to provide for self/family
 - Lack of awareness about community supports for entry-level job seekers
 - Barriers Cited: education/training, transportation, discrimination, criminal record
 - A criminal record is viewed as a nearly insurmountable barrier to employment.
- Labor Demand Focus Groups (12 Small Business Employer Representatives)
 - Expressed strong desire for soft skills (personality traits of personal responsibility, communication skills, problem solving, and task management)
 - Barriers Cited: education/training, home-life disruptions, criminal background
- Possible Connections
 - Agreement that education/training deficiencies are a barrier
 - Agreement that criminal background is a barrier
 - Agreement that soft skills (personal responsibility and networking) are important
 - Job-seekers desire workplace experience, and small-business expressed an interest in providing intern-like experiences for job-seekers
- Possible Disconnections
 - Soft skills tend to be valued more highly by small businesses than recognized by job-seekers.
 - Employers view education “beyond the book” as very important, but job-seekers view near-term attainment of an education credential, let alone work experience, as a significant challenge.
 - Job seekers overvalue job availability that comes with attainment of GED/High School Diploma, undervalue the importance of prior work experience when applying for entry-level jobs
 - Employers report that from 7% (HR interviews) to 17% (HR survey) of applicants fail a drug screen, but job-seekers provided varied responses as to whether drug usage was a potential barrier.

Barriers to Meaningful Employment in Chatham County

- Multiple barriers exist.
- Deficiency in education and training was considered to be a significant barrier.
- There was agreement from job-seekers and employers that transportation barriers exist.
- Childcare was viewed by employers as a potential problem among the workforce.
- Criminal background was viewed as a potential barrier, but as a much more significant barrier by job-seekers. Employers indicate that many applicants with a criminal record (81% of misdemeanors, 21% of felons) remain in consideration for positions, but job-seekers in local focus groups considered a criminal record as a nearly insurmountable barrier.

Similarities of Barriers in Chatham County to State, Southeast, and Nation

- The effect of multiple barriers is compounded.
- Deficiencies in education and training are a primary barrier to employment.
- Soft skill deficiencies are a significant barrier.
- Lack of transportation is a significant barrier.
- Screening checks for drug use and poor credit are lesser barriers.
- Possessing a criminal record dramatically alters attitudes toward pursuing employment and has a direct detrimental effect during the job-search process.
- Employers placed a lesser weight on criminal backgrounds by reporting some, but not universal, disqualifying influence, while job-seekers viewed the issue as catastrophic.