



Vermont State Workforce Development Board
Manufacturing Committee - Meeting Minutes
March 14th, 2022
11:00 am – 12:00 pm

Committee Members in Attendance: Meg Hammond, Veronica Newton, Brian Carpenter, Kiersten Bourgeois, Mark Ray

Guests in Attendance: Victoria Biondolillo, Abigail Rhim

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo called the meeting to order at 11:04 am. She began by describing the purpose of the committee and how she hopes members' candid feedback can be taken to the administration and used to make change. She also stated if any members in attendance have ideas of others in the industry to potentially join the committee, she is happy to meet with them. She then began with introductions.

Meg Hammond, Executive Director at Generator

Veronica Newton, Senior Director of Programs and Partnership at Generator

Brian Carpenter, President and General Manager of Champlain Valley Equipment

Kiersten Bourgeois, Manager for Communications and Industry Affairs for Dairy Farmers of America

Mark Ray, Owner and Head Cider Maker at Stowe Cider and President of VT Cider Association

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo then asked the group what some of the biggest challenges in terms of hiring are that the manufacturing industry faces. Outside of well-known issues like housing, childcare, broadband, etc., she wanted to focus on the more granular issues on the ground that need to be addressed.

Kiersten Bourgeois highlighted her industry's need to operate 24/7 and how challenging it is to recruit second and third shift workers. She also noted that the average age of workers is creeping up and how she doesn't see younger folks entering the industry.

Brian Carpenter added that he is opening a new store in Essex and while he has been able to find help, he would like to target retired military. He noted that this is not something he has been able to do successfully due to the tax on Vermont military retirement income.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo agreed and stated that the military tax pension exemption is currently being discussed this legislative session. She also mentioned the State Workforce Development Board's potential partnership with a company that would drive job candidates to VT JobLink to attract a more diverse workforce to Vermont jobs.

Mark Ray then echoed Kiersten Bourgeois, saying that second shifts and weekends are hardest to fill. He also mentioned infrastructure and the importance of not having a narrow focus when we think about the workforce crisis in Vermont. For example, the traffic to Stowe on Saturdays, the day that brings in the largest amount of income, is heaviest. He mentioned employees not wanting to come in or requesting to be paid while they wait in traffic for 1-2 hours before a shift.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo then asked the group about any minimum qualifications needed when hiring someone.

Kiersten Bourgeois noted a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and/or a Safe Quality Food (SQF) certification, depending on the position. She also noted how at this point, they would be happy to take someone with a strong work ethic and ability to learn, if they show up on time.

Mark Ray agreed saying that he is willing to train anyone with a good attitude, who shows up on time, if they are 21+ in age, due to the nature of his business.

Brian Carpenter then noted technical schools and the importance of changing the dialogue surrounding 4-year colleges. He highlighted the success of kids who leave technical schools with experience and job opportunities lined up before they leave.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo agreed with Brian. She then stressed how we need to be exposing kids to opportunities in the trades earlier. She asked the group how we fill jobs today but also long term, when do we start showing kids all their options and foster an interest in manufacturing earlier on.

Veronica Newton then mentioned a new position opening at Generator that aims to connect middle and high school students with digital design modeling and fabrication. This person at Generator will serve as an entry point for students to gain awareness and exposure to different career opportunities. She then stressed that a job like this is so important to help fill more jobs in the community down the road, however, it has been hard to find a salary to pay this person and cost of living in Vermont doesn't always match the salary.

Meg Hammon also mentioned the struggle of inflation and pay. She also reviewed Generator's maker spaces that they are working to install in various middle and high schools to expose kids, and those who are retired, to machinery. She added that we may want to focus on shortening the pipeline with the goal of getting a certificate of value quickly in order to help folks enter the workforce.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo posed the question of how do we connect programs like Generator to local employers, finalize these relationships and make the whole system efficient? She then stated that in our next meeting, we should aim to visualize what our ideal pipeline would look like.

Meg Hammond stressed that while it is good to look at strengthening the pipeline, we need to address counterintuitive issues like traditional schools losing money when their students go to technical schools (H.483). If we are fighting over dollars, we can build out pathways with no significant impact. She also stressed how as a society, we need to shift the narrative to valuing hands on service workers and creators.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo agreed, stating that we need to support change in the system otherwise, traditional schools are going to win out every single time and they will not be encouraging kids to explore technical schools.

Meg Hammond again stressed the importance of shortening pathways and pipelines. She stated that 4 years of college is way too long for some to be joining a community and earning an income. She shared that we could even reimagine CTEs, going back and dismantling how they traditionally function as well.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo noted the ARPA funding, the state's focus on bigger issues and the opportunity we have in this unique period. She stressed the administration's focus on housing, childcare, broadband, etc.

Meg Hammond then asked what kind of money, if any, is attached to these discussions.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo responded by saying that anything within the committee would be a separate ask if we request money. She did note that there are already certain things mentioned today that are mentioned in the Governor's Budget Address.

Meg Hammond then used Beta Technologies and their internships as an example. They have had to educate people as they create electrical aircrafts and self-educate right off the bat. If more companies could get a stipend to have internships, it would help shorten the pipeline path.

Executive Director agreed that an internship program with funding or other projects are the type of ideas that we should be identifying in these committee conversations. We then can either ask for funding from the legislature or note if something isn't feasible. She stressed that she wants committee members to think of their "perfect world" and they can bring it to committee meetings to be presented to the Governor and the Legislature. Then pivoting, she stressed focusing on immediate problems in our next meeting, like filling jobs with quality candidates. She also mentioned discussing our strategy for marketing, traffic driving and identifying companies to get on board.

Brian Carpenter then stressed the long-term impact of systemic problems, like addressing the structure of our education system. He mentioned the return of investment in the trades and pushing that narrative to attract kids to CTEs.

Executive Director Victoria Biondolillo stated that she will provide information from the current budget proposal to committee members prior to the next meeting for folks to get a sense of what is already in the works.

The meeting was adjourned by 11:50 am.

Respectfully submitted by Abby Rhim

Abby Rhim, Executive Assistant
Vermont State Workforce Development Board