

**Growing a Workforce Development Program Amid  
a Contracting Labor Force, a Pandemic,  
and Shifting Approaches to Work**

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## Background

Launched during the Covid-19 Pandemic in October of 2020, Wilson Works faced the challenge of building a workforce development program despite social distancing, office closures, and the shift to remote work and online classroom learning. All the stakeholders necessary for effective workforce program execution were keeping their distance while a virus exploded across the community. Meanwhile, retirements were doubling and workers were quitting in record numbers as they assessed work life balance in the face of the pandemic. Layer on the declining number of Tennessee high school graduates attending post-secondary training and the result is fewer people to bring skills to the robust job market. Amid this workforce landscape, Wilson Works began the challenge of building a community workforce development program from the ground up.

## Opportunity

With pressure from all sectors, Wilson Works embarked upon the task of building relationships and engaging stakeholders with relevant data and program implementation. While there are excellent education and training programs in Wilson County, there was no single program to align the efforts of all workforce stakeholders. In 2019, a collaborative of business leaders, economic developers, mayors, K12 schools, post-secondary training providers, and local Chambers of Commerce leveraged resources to secure a Three Star Grant from Tennessee Economic and Community Development, which provided \$40,250 to get the program started.

## Applicable TECD Coursework

The University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services (UT CIS) Tennessee Workforce Development course provided helpful links and tools to support Wilson Works in crafting the workforce story in Wilson County. Relying heavily on labor market information

from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development ([www.jobs4tn.gov](http://www.jobs4tn.gov)), data illustrated commute patterns, labor shed areas, and workforce demographics. The Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, (<https://reportcard.tnedu.gov/>) provided a deeper dive on Wilson County's high school talent pipeline providing graduation rates, post-secondary enrollment, and completions. The Higher Education Data & Statistics U.S. Department of Education (<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>) shed light on post-secondary educational attainment. Boasting higher labor market participation and graduation rates than state and national numbers, Wilson Works can illustrate a desirable skilled workforce residing in the community. Wilson Works developed a monthly email featuring updated data on unemployment and labor market participation rates in Wilson County, the State, and U.S. While providing helpful data, the communication also positions Wilson Works as a key workforce resource for employers. Pulling government workforce data regularly provides the kind of relevant messaging that builds credibility and consistency among employers.

The UT CIS Tennessee Business Retention and Expansion course provided lessons for engaging employers, which is a crucial component to building a workforce program. Prior to the establishment of Wilson Works, the community did not have a single point person or organization for existing industry with knowledge of workforce programs and services in the public and private sector. While there are ample opportunities to network through civic and business organizations, none provide the data and network for workforce-related issues confronting employers. Among employers who have been engaged in the program, Wilson Works has become the trusted partner to employers, educators and government leaders by establishing relationships through industry councils that meet monthly. The establishment of

industry councils has proven an exceptional business retention practice. The monthly meetings build rapport and provide a safe space for employers to network among each other.

UT CIS Tennessee Managing Economic Development Organizations course provided the framework of establishing and revisiting strategic planning, especially for an emerging organization seeking to build credibility and relevancy among diverse stakeholders spread among business, government and education. Wilson Works began by utilizing the vision established by the collaborative of stakeholders and translated that into organizational priorities and desired outcomes. The Director met individually with the four initial investors of Wilson Works, elected mayors, education leaders from the post-secondary and K12 schools, the local economic development director and directors of the chambers of commerce. These meetings confirmed the organizational vision as laid out in the grant application, which provided the foundational funding for building the program. The organization set four goals for the first year of launch. 1. establish industry councils for construction, manufacturing and supply chain; 2. facilitate career and/or job fairs; 3. explore grant opportunities; and 4. facilitate seminars, webinars, etc., to expose employers to programs/services available to them for workforce development. Within twelve (12) months, Wilson Works achieved all four goals.

Wilson Works is a trusted partner to the local economic development program for prospects visiting the community. The UT CIS Tennessee Marketing and Attraction course provided insight on illustrating the workforce pipeline in addition to highlighting traditional workforce data such as the labor shed, wage comparisons and commute patterns. The Wilson County Joint Economic and Community Development program includes Wilson Works as a value-added resource in the community by connecting and engaging new industry to workforce programs and pipelines. Wilson Works supports new and existing companies with recruitment

strategies and connections to support through the Northern Middle Workforce Board, the American Job Center and training providers with students in industry specific pathways. With Industry Councils that feature topical speakers, seminars and career events, economic developers can point to a community investing in current workforce challenges and future workforce pipelines. In its first year (2020-21), Wilson Works provided employers access to online and in person career fairs, sessions on establishing work-based learning, OSHA training, community support systems for employees in crisis, reentry programs, and best practices in recruiting and retention.

### Identified State / National Standards

While building Wilson Works, three things became abundantly clear as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The workforce was undergoing a massive shift primarily due to the Great Resignation, retiring Baby Boomers, and the quick shift to remote work made possible by the internet. The declining numbers of students attending post-secondary after high school, and the projected declines in student populations between 2026 and 2037 illustrate the timeliness and importance of aligning stakeholders to develop skills within all labor force pipelines. The 2020 Northern Middle Tennessee Local Workforce Study concluded as much in its review of the major shortages of skilled labor in the thirteen (13) county region that includes Wilson County. It advised long-term strategies should include development of infrastructure that ensures alignment between employers and the region's training providers and educational institutions. The study indicates that it is imperative for employers to establish relationships with training providers and students well before graduation.

Covid-19 launched what came to be known as "The Great Resignation" in which millions of American workers quit their jobs. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported

that a record 4.5 million workers left their jobs in November 2021. Texas A&M Management Professor Anthony Klotz, who coined the term, says the pandemic caused American workers to reassess the long-held beliefs about work, and how it should be done. Wilson County employers participating in industry councils reported more jobs than applicants. However, the thirteen (13) counties in the Northern Middle Workforce region that includes Wilson, Cheatham, Davidson, Dickson, Houston, Humphries, Montgomery, Robertson, Rutherford, Stewart, Sumner, Trousdale and Williamson experienced moderate declines in labor market participation (LMR) rates during the pandemic. Wilson County, for example, had a 71.4 LMR in December of 2019. It dropped to 69.2 in December of 2020, and rebounded to 70.3 by December of 2021.

When the Covid-19 Pandemic coursed across the globe in 2020, the number of retiring Baby Boomers doubled from 2019 per data from Pew Research Center. That represents more than 3.2 million fewer people in the workforce. By November 2021, Pew Research reported that more than half of Americans aged 55+ had left the workforce. Considering the workforce is comprised of people aged 16 to 65, the impact is an enormous loss to the available workforce willing to power America's business and industry. Another trend that emerged during the pandemic was a shift in the approach to work life balance as remote work models were adopted by scores of companies. EMSI, a company specializing in workforce data, highlighted two studies in a 2021 report. One by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce found that 36% of middle-market companies reported having remote employees at the end of 2021 who were in office prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. Nearly half of the companies polled said they are providing permanent full-time remote options. The report also noted a survey of workers by GitLab, which found 1 in 3 respondents would quit their job if remote working was no longer an option, and 52% would consider leaving their company for a remote role.

Another challenge facing the workforce pipeline is the number of high school seniors not enrolling in college. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission reported fewer graduating seniors enrolling in post-secondary education in all but nine counties in 2021. That trend holds true in Wilson County. In the 2020 Tennessee Department of Education Report Card on Wilson County Schools, 65.8 percent of graduates enrolled in college, or technical training. That number reflects a downward trend from a high of 70.8 in 2018. As more data on birthrates and population shifting evolves, the workforce pipeline will narrow due to declining student population. High school graduations are projected to decline in the South, which includes Tennessee, per data from the Western Interstate Collaborative on Higher Education. A December 2020 report in “Projections of High School Graduates” study indicated that high school graduations in the South would peak in about four years resulting in about 1.5 million graduates in 2026, and would trend downward annually to 1.4 million by 2037.

### Project Description

Wilson Works was established to develop mutually beneficial partnerships by aligning workforce stakeholders with the needs of employers and prospective and future employees. Wilson Works operates under the direction of a Workforce Development Executive Board and Executive Committee. They consist of representatives of top funding industry representatives, educational institutions, and city and county government officials. The Executive Board meets quarterly to review progress, provide feedback and suggestions for moving the organization forward. The Executive Committee meets monthly to provide oversight to the day-to-day operations of Wilson Works. The Committee is charged with helping to secure funding for the organization. Relying on donations from the private sector, the Committee serves in a supervisory capacity to set strategy for development campaigns, targeted industries and reporting

of investments. The Committee also oversees personnel, sets salary and incentive packages, and any personnel related issues that may arise.

### Goals and Objectives for Wilson Works

Wilson Works sets goals for workforce development through industry councils, K12 schools, and post-secondary training providers. To connect students and citizens to high wage, high demand jobs, Wilson Works partners with these stakeholders to create improved outcomes with industry-relevant training. Through industry councils, employers can support and advise educators to ensure that training programs in K12 or post-secondary institutions is relevant to current and future industry needs. Ultimately, Wilson Works aims to establish work-based learning opportunities for students that lead to viable employment. When employers open their doors to students, they are accessing a talent pipeline already motivated to learn skills specific to the industry.

### Project Timeframe

While the strategic plan is reviewed and updated annually, initial plans called for three years commitment. Established with the hiring of the Director in October 2020, the program is now nearing its second full year.

### Results

In the first 12 months, Wilson Works achieved four goals, and executed a number of events to build momentum for the workforce development program. With such diverse stakeholders and a pandemic pressuring in-person meetings, the Director met and/or engaged stakeholders on their own terms. In some cases, they chose in-person meetings while others could only meet online.



### Education Roundtable

Wilson Works established an Education Roundtable within the first few months of the program. Since K12 and post-secondary training providers are crucial to the workforce pipeline, it is imperative to gain support of all the schools so they become partners in program and event execution. Both Wilson County Schools and Lebanon Special School District were among the stakeholders who helped develop Wilson Works. Both public school systems are instrumental in the establishment of events that engage students in relevant career pathways. For example, the first virtual job fair for the high school graduating Class of 2021. It was promoted in all five (5) high schools. Due to the support of the Director of Wilson County Schools, students were allowed class time, and access to the school's high-speed internet to connect with employers online during the event. In light of the continuing pandemic, it was a win for employers, schools and seniors looking for jobs. With fewer enrollments in post-secondary, community colleges, Tennessee College of Applied Technology and local universities are all invested in creating relationships and synergy in connecting with high school students due to the potential for dual enrollment, and creating relationships with local employers. The Education Roundtable meets quarterly online primarily for convenience since the training providers are spread among a three-county area.

### Industry Councils

Within six months, Wilson Works had made enough connections to host an organizational meeting for the Wilson County Industry Council with employers from the construction, supply chain and manufacturing sectors. All of these industries are among the top 10 fastest for job growth in Wilson County. Wilson Works hosted monthly meetings to keep employers engaged with relevant workforce related topics. It hosted half-day seminars in the

first year for OSHA Returning from the Pandemic instruction, and a session on work-based learning (WBL) featuring the Tennessee Department of Education, Labor and Workforce Development and three Tennessee employers successfully executing WBL with teens from local high schools.

### Second year goals

In its second full year, Wilson Works is poised to complete goals to move workforce development efforts to earlier grades, and to add a fourth industry council. In collaboration with area employers, Wilson County Schools and Lebanon Special School District, Wilson Works executed an 8<sup>th</sup> Grade virtual Career Exploration for all Middle Schools. Additionally, it has held two organizational sessions for an emerging healthcare council by inviting training providers and employers to work together toward engaging students interested in healthcare careers. The 2020 Northern Middle Workforce Study identified healthcare as the industry with the widest gap between jobs and the available skilled workforce to fill those positions. It is a crucial industry for an aging society and continued effects of Covid-19 and emerging virus subvariants.

In addition to a Career Expo for 1,100 high school seniors in the Fall of 2021, Wilson Works has proven effective in partnering with schools and post-secondary training providers as a collaborator for grant applications. It participated as a partner agency for Innovative School Grant programs and GIVE Grants for vocational education programs. Wilson Works joined forces with the Tennessee Alliance for Economic Mobility, a collaborative of agencies and nonprofit organizations in nine (9) counties, which secured a \$25 million grant from the Tennessee Department of Human Services that will pilot a program to help at-risk families navigate the benefits cliff while working to achieve economic security.

Relying on support from employers, Wilson Works secured investment commitments of \$105,000 from employers in the first year. This year, there is an additional \$85,000 in commitments, and there are now 14 investors supporting the program

### Lessons Learned

Workforce research is sobering as all statistics point to a sizeable shift in the availability of workforce. It positions workforce programs such as Wilson Works as imperative to engaging all stakeholders in solutions. When factoring in the declining numbers of students entering post-secondary training, the large numbers of retirees leaving the labor force, and the anticipated decline in the total student population in the next 10 to 20 years, workforce solutions will require the collective expertise and participation of all community stakeholders.

Meanwhile, Wilson Works faces the challenge of a funding model that relies on the generosity of private sector employers. Funding may become scarce as employers are faced with a continued shrinking labor force. Their resources may be redirected to much-needed recruiting budgets. Communities looking to build workforce programs may better secure sustained funding by including the program in local economic development organizations, or public-school systems. In Tennessee, most workforce development programs are either a function of K12 schools, post-secondary training providers, chambers of commerce, or economic development organizations.

Certainly, a best practice for Wilson Works has been listening to all stakeholders. Inevitably, program resiliency relies on ideas from the collective. New goals emerge from the educators, employers, economic developers, job seekers, and elected leaders who have a stake in the economic well-being of the community. As the labor force continues to contract and

approaches to work shift with the upcoming generations, it will take the community's collective expertise to respond.

### Guidance on Getting Started

If a community is exploring a workforce development program, here are three items to consider.

1. **Who:** It is important to gain consensus among all workforce stakeholders in the community. It will likely take a series of meetings and candid conversations on establishing a focused workforce development program. There are many layers to workforce development. In Tennessee, stakeholders typically include K12 schools, post-secondary training providers (tech schools, community colleges and universities), local economic developers, industrial development boards, chambers of commerce, workforce boards, mayors and employers. Workforce boards usually represent several contiguous counties with appointees from each county mayor. The workforce boards administer state and federal workforce funding through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).
2. **Funding:** Wilson Works took advantage of a Three Star Grant from Tennessee Economic and Community Development, which requires all communities to include workforce programs in their annual plans. Grants typically do not allow for funds to be used for salaries, but can be used for programs and office equipment. As mentioned, workforce programs can be budgeted as existing industry and workforce under local economic development boards. This provides a built-in advocate and marketing partner for prospective industry visitors who prioritize workforce within and around the community in considering location. Workforce development

programs may also become a partner program under a chamber, or educational institution. Examples include Williamson, Inc., (<https://williamsonchamber.com/economic-development/>) and Rutherford Works (<https://rutherfordworks.com/workforce-development/>) in middle Tennessee. In east Tennessee, Pellissippi State Community College is debuting a Workforce Development Center in Blount County for the college and TCAT Knoxville. (<https://bma1915.com/projects/pellissippi-state-workforce-center>) Meanwhile, in upper east Tennessee, the First Tennessee Development District (<https://www.ftdd.org/workforce>) includes workforce development in its portfolio of economic and community development.

3. Employers: Local business and industry are deeply impacted by workforce. Engaging them in workforce solutions is paramount to any program. All are sitting on sizeable investments in the community and have a stake in attracting talent to produce products and services. Engaging them to become involved in workforce development can be challenging when they are struggling to find enough people to support operations. Illustrating the reality of workforce in your community is imperative to gaining their trust and interest in participating in a workforce program. Knowing and sharing relevant workforce data provides value to employers and helps them plan and position for the future. It also provides a workforce program with the credibility to build opportunities for students and job seekers working toward high-demand, high-paying jobs. Workforce development programs should provide opportunities for all stakeholders to align for improved workforce outcomes that lead to jobs and a thriving economy.

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