

Summit addresses chronic skills gap in local workforce



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Published on: May 12, 2017 | Last Updated: May 12, 2017 6:15 PM EDT



Job seekers pack the Caboto Club in this July 30, 2015 photo. *TYLER BROWNBIDGE / WINDSOR STAR*

It's a growing problem called the skills gap — workers without jobs, and jobs without workers.

Employers, educators, trainers and government representatives put their heads together at a summit Friday to address how to tackle the dilemma.

“We’d like to see a responsive approach to [the skills gap],” said Michelle Suchiu, interim executive director of Workforce WindsorEssex, the local employment planning council that hosted Friday’s all-day event. “To be able to lift up those people in our community, provide them with the training that they need in a very timely manner, to make sure that we fill those workforce gaps that our employers need.”

Suchiu said addressing the skills gap is critical for economic development and improving local residents’ prosperity.

“Our unemployment rate has dropped, but we still have employers that need people. We have a large [group] of people in our community with vibrant skills to offer, to drive our local economy,” Suchiu said. “But we also have people that don’t have the skill sets that our employers need.”

Windsor-Essex’s unemployment rate dropped to 4.9 per cent from 9.7 per cent over the last 18 months. Despite the drop, 8,200 people are still looking for local work, says. WorkForce WindsorEssex. Meanwhile, local employers are finding it difficult to hire.

People without jobs and jobs without people is a “chronic problem” said Matt Marchand, president and CEO of the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce.

“We have a group over here looking for a job, and we have a group over here looking to hire people, and the two aren’t meeting.

“If you talk to employers having a hard time finding someone with the right skills, it’s over 50 per cent [of employers],” Marchand said. “Three years ago, it was 25 per cent.”

The skills gap in Windsor-Essex is one of the most acute in Ontario.

About 12 per cent of the workforce population in the Windsor-Essex region has no high school diploma or any sort of certificate, said Frazier Fathers, manager of community impact and learning at United Way/Centraide Windsor-Essex County.

According to Statistics Canada’s 2011 National Household Survey, 22.8 per cent of Ontario’s adult population had only a high school diploma. Fathers said Windsor-Essex County has a six per cent higher rate than the provincial average of high school being the top level of education achieved.

The region is also six per cent behind the provincial average in bachelor degree attainment, said Fathers.

“That is, in essence, the crux of the skills gap,” Fathers said.

Marchand said we have to make sure that people in the workforce don’t get left behind.

“What we have to do is identify how we get those folks, who have been left behind, back engaged in the workforce.”

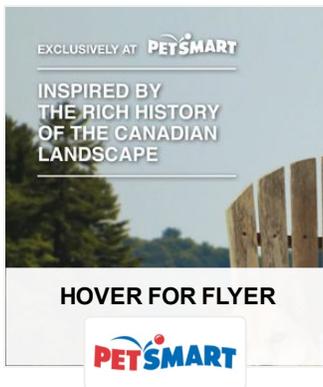
Marchand said that getting people back into the workforce “is the most common problem” in Ontario, other than the cost of energy.

“We have to do a better job anticipating where demand is going to be, and say, look, if you want to do X, Y, Z... you’re going to struggle. You want to go into machinist, welding ... or plumbing – you’re going to get picked up right away,” Marchand said.

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