

Rochester Rhinos when the team was having financial trouble, but that deal never developed. They decided to bring back the Lancers as an indoor soccer team and

## SURVEY

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perpetually unfilled positions and determined that only 44 percent of the companies believe Rochester's business climate will improve in the future.

A total of 338 businesses participated in the survey, representing roughly 86,000 employees in the Rochester region. The survey will be one of many versions of workforce data that will be compiled, since the partners want to update the information every six months, officials said.

The findings suggest that roughly 23,000 positions are unfilled across the region, specifically middle-skill positions requiring workers with some postsecondary training. The skills required might be developed with work experience in a related occupation or long-term on-the-job training, the report states. A middle-skill worker makes roughly \$43,000 per year on average. The most commonly unfilled occupations were in production, with 32 percent unfilled. Machinists had a 62 percent unfilled rate.

The idea for the survey developed two and a half years ago. It was started because of the desire to find out more about Rochester's workforce and how national trends apply to the region.

Participants answered 17 questions dealing with business climate, skill needs and training specific to the Finger Lakes region. Most participants were in three industries: trade, transportation and warehousing.

Employment levels were optimistic indicators with nearly 50 percent of businesses maintaining their employment and less than 15 percent reducing their employee count. Currently, 54 percent of respondents view Rochester as a place for a busi-

ness to succeed, and 12 percent disagree. **Unusual response rate**

The response rate for the survey was considered uncommonly high.

"We were very pleased with the response rate," said Kent Gardner, project director and chief economist and research officer for CGR. "The share of total employment in the Rochester area that was captured by the survey was pretty high. That's always a big challenge, particularly for a business survey. It's difficult to get businesspeople to respond. I found it unusual."

The main purposes of the survey were to explore a middle-skills pathway system, to help support both career and technical education opportunities, to address the educational pipeline to analyze the future workforce and to give the business community clarity on the business environment.

Forethought by MCC was credited for the response rate among businesses. The college set up a channel that allowed the survey to filter through businesses and find the target audience. The MCC Business and Industry Database was a key in the success of the survey, since the 2,400 businesses on the listing helped the partners to establish communication and relationships with businesses.

"It was sort of the idea that you target your audience and you get them to know a little bit about you," said Todd Oldham, MCC's vice president of economic development and innovative workforce services. "The goal was to create a database of interested businesses upfront and then use that as your communication channel for a variety of things—one of them being surveys like this, so that we can have a much broader amount of input for some of these questions to know where we should be invest-

ing our funds in terms of programming." The initial survey is regarded as a success. "I'm very pleased for the first survey," Oldham said. "Basically, we wanted to know what's happening on a more granular level so that we didn't just want to know is there a skills gap. Everybody talks about a skills gap, but what does that mean here? What does that mean to employers? In the past our economy was more dominated by larger employers, and now it's dominated by businesses with less than 100 employees."

The questions posed by the survey were effective in getting the responses the team sought.

"Well, you try to get a lot of questions," Gardner said. "You're trying to catch the pulse of the economy at a specific time. You're asking a question, and sometimes you get information that comes back that confuses you a little bit."

The survey reveals the employer's view of the workforce, but potential employees also play a role in the process.

"It just supports the fact that there are many opportunities out there, and the job seekers also have to be open," said Peter Pecor, executive director of RochesterWorks Inc. "I talk about the employers not being flexible or being too selective. I think it's also the job seeker, what their expectations are. Maybe whatever function or job they were doing for a number of years, there are skills there that can be transferable to another totally different industry." One way businesses could fill positions is by working with existing systems to help workers, Pecor said.

For the gap between employers and potential employees to be reduced, both sides have to be more flexible.

"I think the number of employers that

hind the counter, I'll do it. I'm not above (anyone) just because I own the stores."

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are out there, especially the small and medium-size companies, many times they talk about not having individuals to fill their positions but yet they don't take the next step to actually list their job openings with us," Pecor said. "Any opportunity they may have to list their job openings post with us, that would certainly be of great benefit, because you know obviously we see thousands of people every year."

With so much information collected, the process of interpretation can be tough. "I think we are trying to discern what some of that information actually means," Gardner says. "I think this is also the case for many, many surveys, and that's another reason why it is helpful to come back and do it a second time."

## Workforce changes

As Rochester's business community now has more companies with fewer than 100 employees, the business environment continues to change.

"The voice (of companies) is much more fragmented, and so it's harder through just getting six or seven or eight people to give you input from an advisory board. You don't catch some of those trends, particularly the ones that don't get talked about," Oldham said. "A lot of small businesses don't participate actively in terms of those types of venues, so I'm always concerned that their voice isn't there."

In light of the skills mismatch, other elements such as realistic expectations in pay are necessary for a job seeker and employer. Often pay rates are not meeting potential workers' investment in acquiring those skills, which can be a frustration. So job seekers look elsewhere.

Unfilled positions are more common in

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