

CHAMBER EXECUTIVE

Talent Attraction and Retention

Competing for Tomorrow's Workforce



Charlotte

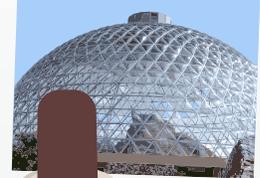
Watertown S.D.

OKC

BOISE



Omaha



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- Walkable Downtown \$
- Job Opportunities \$
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- Recreation! \$
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- Nightlife \$
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Competing for Tomorrow's Workforce

Attracting and retaining talented workers is a key component of economic development, requiring deep commitment, careful research, and continuing resources.

By Ryan Regan and Matthew Tarleton

“When a community can’t align meaningful job opportunities with skills, outmigration will continue. By fostering education attainment initiatives, chambers can address skills-jobs disconnects and tap the abundance of employment opportunities. They must also create an environment in which talent can migrate freely within, and be attracted to, their regions.”

— ACCE’s HORIZON INITIATIVE: CHAMBERS 2025.

The scarcity and abundance dichotomy continues to define our global economy. It also shapes the way in which community, economic, and workforce development professionals approach their work. After all, if resources like talented workers, land, water, and tax revenues were aligned there would be little need to fret over labor shortages, water availability, infrastructure finance, or any of the other difficult realities that confront communities.

Regions compete for talent, and the topic dominates strategic planning discussions for most chambers and economic development organizations (EDOs). Talented workers who possess the technical skills, education levels, and innovative capabilities sought by top employers are key to any well-reasoned economic development strategy. The good and bad news is that talent is more mobile than at any time in our history.

Even the most successful and envied regions, and their chambers, have begun to invest heavily in talent attraction and retention. But many are struggling, misfiring, and wasting limited resources with haphazard or misguided investments. They build an extravagant website, then call it a day. They place advertisements hoping to change someone’s mind about their town or talent pool. They seem to convince themselves: “If we can just tell our story then people will fall in



PILLARS



Growgrandisland.com reflects the community’s cooperative approach to growth, driven by residents and involving the local chamber, CVB, Economic Development Corp., and the city and county governments.

love with us. If we can just get them here, they’ll never want to leave.” No one can afford these attitudes or the expenditure of “ready, fire, aim” investments, so why do they persist?

Over the decades, chambers and EDOs have established and refined a fairly systematic model for business attraction and retention, using very similar, time-tested approaches to attracting and retaining businesses. But these strategies only scratch the surface when it comes to talent ▷

development, attraction and retention. Many such organizations don't know where to start, or how to adapt to future realities, on the ever more important talent side of the equation. Unlike in the job development arena, there is no systematic approach when it comes to workforce. That must change.

Through our work with chambers and communities of all sizes across the country, Market Street Services has witnessed best practices at work—and we've seen some of the worst. That hands-on experience and a growing pool of research suggest that a systematic approach to talent attraction and retention should be authentic, inclusive, research-based and, importantly, resourced. A branding exercise or ad campaign just won't work, even though such episodic approaches can feel satisfying in the short run.

Do Your Research

In 2015, under the leadership of CEO Hala Modellmog, the Metro Atlanta Chamber (MAC) began to invest heavily in a talent attraction and retention initiative, starting with exhaustive market research to help understand the attitudes about the Atlanta region among potential and existing workers of all types, ages and industry types. This research helped MAC better understand the perceptions of residents vs. non-residents, the wants and needs of prospective employees, and the ways in which these perceptions, wants, and needs varied by location. It helped ensure that MAC targeted and framed messages and advertisements to be compelling for specific audiences in the right places. Media selection fit the target audiences and steps were taken to utilize data-based decision making in all talent related communications.

Dare to Be Different

Real places. Real people. Real problems. If you dare to be authentic, you are daring to be different. And that could make all the difference when appealing to talent, as opposed to site selectors. Similar messaging from so many communities ensures that your message will not be read or heard. In our work around the country we often hear, "We're a mid-sized town with access to big city amenities." Or, the flip side of the



WorkintheTriangle.com is part of the talent attraction initiative for the Research Triangle region of North Carolina. It involves multiple chambers and economic development organizations. The campaign's goal is to showcase the Triangle as one of the top destinations for talented professionals in the next five years.

same message: "We're a big city with a small town feel." These descriptors are not effective. They may be true and they may express what we love the most about the places we call home, but they are forgettable and not differentiators. In some cases, the clichés actually turn off the young talent you seek.

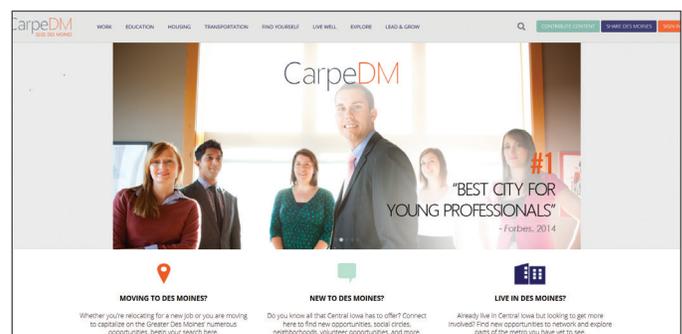
Many chambers recruit "ambassadors" to tell authentic stories about their communities. The Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce's "WorkInTheTriangle" initiative has its "Smarty Pants Ambassadors," MAC's "ChooseATL" has its "Featured Atlantans." Some take it a step further and create meaningful personal connections between existing and prospective residents. Ambassadors can tell authentic stories, but often a more personal touch can go a long way. Who can help a prospective employee – perhaps a key employee in a well-known company – get acquainted, settled, or connected?

Create Connections to People

Many prospective new residents will have no existing connection to your city, town or region; no friends, family, or coworkers to whom they can pose questions.

Headlining the Des Moines Partnership's efforts in talent attraction and retention is the "CarpeDM" (Seize Des Moines) initiative, which features among other things its own website and social media presence (seizedesmoines.com). Prospects visiting the website can connect via LinkedIn with community members who have volunteered to be a resource on specific topics ranging from the local weather to advanced degree options. Conversations can be started around job opportunities, housing options, schools and other issues that really matter to a prospective resident.

Another great program that creates personal connections is the Baton Rouge Area Chamber's "Around the Table" program. It places more than 200 newcomers each year in the homes of various community leaders for a meet-and-eat dinner. Conversation at each home focuses on a specific topic. This program reflects the importance of belonging and gathering (another Horizon Initiative trend) in the talent attraction/retention arena.



CarpeDM (seizedesmoines.com) is a content rich site—including downloadable curated songs from central Iowa musicians—for anyone seeking information about living and working in the Des Moines area.

Remember Your Internal Audience

While your ambassadors can tell an authentic story to those who may not have a personal connection in your community, the friends and family of prospective new residents are as authentic and trusted as they come. Their endorsements are priceless, and they come with the bonus of a pre-existing personal connection should the prospect relocate. A local marketing effort can be just as important as any external marketing. This underscores the importance of strong relationships with local and regional media outlets that can tell positive stories and educate existing residents about interesting aspects of the region they call home. Equally important to this effort is the engagement of regional partners, especially other local and regional chambers of commerce, which is highlighted below.

Don't Go It Alone

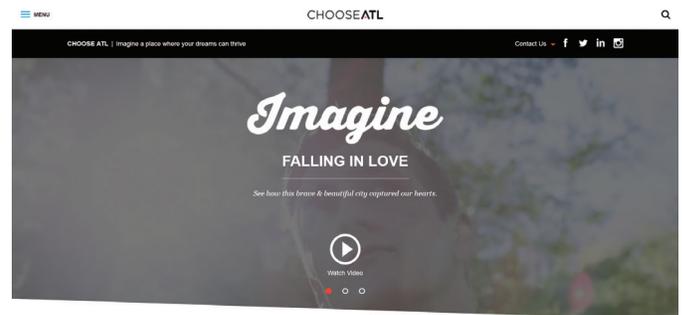
When designing your talent attraction and retention program, consider loosening your grip on creative control. The “ChooseATL” initiative was actually born in the offices of an Atlanta-based digital marketing firm, Nebo Agency, which had been interested in attracting talent it might need. When MAC started working on its initiative, the chamber quickly learned that Nebo had already done much of the legwork on website development and messaging. More importantly, those who had designed “ChooseATL” were precisely the type of creative, young professionals that MAC wanted to target. While “ChooseATL” began as an advertising campaign, it is evolving into a comprehensive initiative.

The same can be said for the “WorkIT Nashville” and “We Build Tech” initiatives launched by the Nashville Area Chamber in partnership with the Nashville Technology Council. Young techies in the council provided input on design and content to the chamber.

Including key stakeholders is also essential for a durable regional talent marketing initiative. In particular, economic development groups and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) should be at the table. Their audiences may be different (prospective investors vs. prospective visitors), but marketing a destination and its quality of place is their central mission.

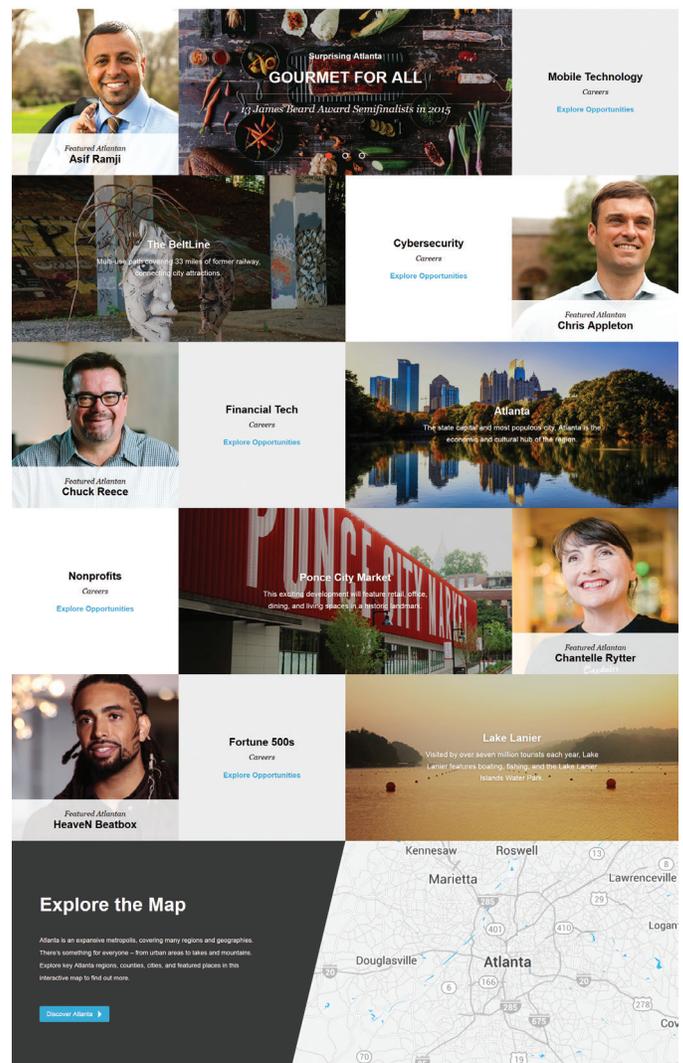
Create Connections to Jobs

Job searchers have lots of options online. A chamber's online talent attraction program must offer value to job seekers beyond what they could otherwise find on their own. Numerous talent attraction websites, including many developed and operated by chambers of commerce, incorporate a location-specific interface to one of the national job search engines. Yet with fewer features and limited search functionality, these special interfaces actually do a disservice to job seekers by providing less utility and value than could be obtained by simply searching the national job search site. As a result, many talent marketing websites feature content similar to that of a CVB website, and no value is added to the job search process. ▽



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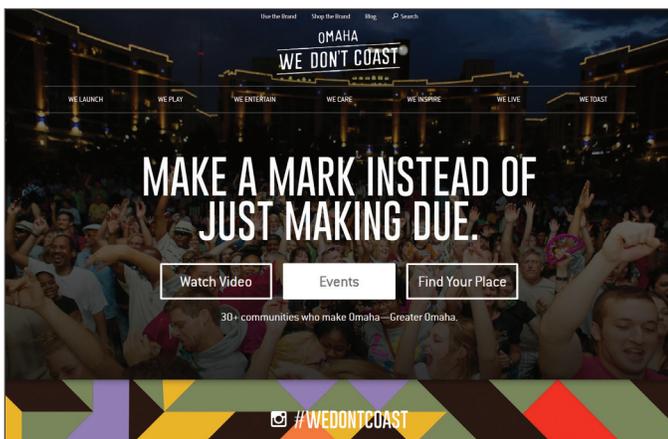
The top of the ChooseATL website features a professional promotional video below which are links to “Featured Atlantans,” career opportunities, dining temptations, maps and local attractions, and more.



Pure Michigan's (www.michigan.org) Talent Connect site (mitalent.org) appears to be a custom search engine featuring more than 85,000 jobs available in Michigan.

A successful talent marketing website can employ a creative and aggressive approach to promoting available job opportunities. For example, the "WorkInTheTriangle" initiative promotes numerous job opportunities via its Twitter account every week. "ChooseATL" recently launched "The Ultimate Job Interview," a contest providing winners up to \$10,000, an expense-paid trip to Atlanta, and the opportunity to interview with top executives from some of the region's largest and fastest-growing companies.

The virtual career fair component of the "Pure Michigan Talent Connect" initiative allows job seekers to chat directly with employers. Employers can easily customize the virtual experience, adding company branding, videos, and job-specific information to the screens presented to a possible applicant during a live video interview. Multiple virtual fairs on the Michigan site are held each year targeting specific industries. Fairs are free for job seekers, and the Michigan Economic De-



The Greater Omaha Chamber's "We Don't Coast" regional branding initiative encompasses 30 communities. The website (wedontcoast.com) is colorful, and loaded with videos, photos and well written links. It makes a strong statement for talent attraction and local pride.

velopment Corporation has helped subsidize the program to keep costs down for employers (\$150-\$300 per event).

Be Holistic and Opportunistic

An effective talent attraction and retention initiative is more than a website, a tagline, or a series of ads. Marketing campaigns have start dates and end dates, but a talent attraction and retention program needs continuity and consistency. Such a sustainable program should be comprehensive, but also holistic. It requires consistent, long-term community investment and support over time, regardless of chamber or political leadership change and staff turnover.

The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce recently launched a campaign entitled "Omaha: We Don't Coast," a rare case of an effective tagline. But in addition to the "We Don't Coast" campaign, which heavily leveraged social media, the chamber launched a number of complementary initiatives.

When the chamber learned of a mass layoff at Microsoft in Seattle, it targeted former Microsoft employees to consider Omaha. Chamber staffers attended tech-focused events in Seattle and handed out stickers with a unique IP address and instructions in computer programming languages. Both would be understood only by the intended audience, and both directed these individuals to a unique web page that favorably compared Omaha to Seattle.

Focus on Retention

It's far easier to retain existing talent than it is to attract new talent, and social/community bonds are key to keeping people. Chambers traditionally have led efforts to ensure residents feel a deep sense of engagement, belonging and well-being, as well as a sense of place. Do they work to promote retention of good people? Only if they are authentic rather than cute. They must also be crafted carefully and refreshed frequently.

Internship, mentorship, and fellowship are valuable components of any comprehensive talent retention initiative. These kinds of programs can help keep your best and brightest from relocating to launch or advance their careers, or help younger participants return to town after their university experience ends.

Chambers help establish professional networks, develop ties to potential full-time employers, and create new experiences that can bond an individual to a community as a professional and as a resident. Encourage employers to develop internships, build databases of available opportunities, and promote those opportunities in partnership with higher education institutions. Such actions are low-cost and a logical fit for chamber missions.

An example is the Northwest Arkansas Emerging Leaders Council, supported by the Rogers-Lowell Chamber of Commerce, which helps connect young people with volunteer service opportunities. One of the council's initiatives making a real impact is a Board Service Certification Program, which helps train and place qualified emerging leaders, often largely excluded millennials, on non-profit boards of directors throughout the region.

Invest in Your Place

A community's quality of place is essential for talent attraction and retention. Simply put, there is no substitute for being a great place, and chambers have been dedicated to enhancing communities and cities since their inception. People value safety, housing options, good schools, and efficient transportation systems, but all of us also value fun. We want entertainment options, arts and sports. We want to live in interesting, inspiring, and beautiful places. Communities and regions that provide a diverse array of options tend to win key battles in the war for talent, especially if they do other things well.

Chambers are often strong advocates for investments that improve the quality of place, but improvements don't always require major funding of physical assets like parks, attractions, or sexy mixed-use development projects. Don't forget the basics. People notice potholes and the trash, as well as the gardens and street art that line your highways and primary access roads. And does the traffic on your roads actually move?

Watertown, S. D., has invested heavily in a number of initiatives related to aesthetics, from litter and graffiti removal to volunteer-led plantings to the development of "Artwalk," a series of sculptures that beautified Uptown Watertown.

Grand Island, Neb., is embarking on a number of similar initiatives to support talent attraction and retention, with the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce partnering with the public sector, a group of dedicated volunteers, and many other community organizations to advance new investments in quality of place.

We have a tendency to overlook these essentials while pursuing the next great project. In the long run, the quality of the product you are selling is more important than the how you sell it, which is why every chamber must see itself as a key part of the talent attraction-retention strategy.

Deploy Staff and Resources

Yes, these initiatives have costs. Advertising, website development, travel, job fairs, leadership development – it all costs money. How can you afford it? When employers and investors have been telling us for years that workforce sustainability and talent availability are a major concern, how can we (and they!) afford not to invest?

Consider the need expressed in the 2025 Horizon Initiative for resource alignment. Chambers must constantly evaluate their value propositions to their members and investors. In a world where talent availability and workforce



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sustainability are among the greatest concerns, if not the single greatest concern of these members and funding partners, how can we claim to be serving their needs and the needs of our communities without adjusting and funding of that mission?

Talent attraction and retention cannot be viewed as an “add-on” program. Someone must wake up every day thinking about this issue. Fortunately, many chambers—not all of them large—have recognized this need and are increasing investment in talent, education and workforce initiatives. The chambers in Decatur, Ala., Grapevine, Texas, and Aurora, Ill., devote the resources they need to make a difference.

“Many chambers and similar organizations are shifting an increasing part of their focus from business transactions toward improving the community or region as a whole and finding investors to address the cause. That transition will accelerate over the coming decade.”

— ACCE’s HORIZON INITIATIVE: CHAMBERS 2025.

Chamber-led talent attraction and retention efforts are clearly intertwined with many of the Eight Influences identified by ACCE as shaping the next decade for chambers of commerce. Our efforts to attract and retain talent are clearly born from and driven by a scarcity of talent that matches the needs of our employers.

While some chambers have led in the field of talent attraction and retention, collectively, we are playing catch up. It is beyond the time for chambers of commerce and similar civic-economic entities to support, and build a case for, a more systematic approach to talent attraction and retention. 



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