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Learning about the Local Labor Market

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Labor Vacancy Surveys

Learning about the Local Labor Market

The simple idea behind a labor vacancy survey is to learn about the experiences of local employers when filling open positions in their businesses. Are they having problems finding qualified workers? Are their workers coming from the local or regional market, or are they being forced to search for those workers far from the community? Is the time required to fill positions, especially if they are being filled by people from outside of the area, in any way a problem for the employers? What kinds of skilled employees are employers seeking and which, if any, are the most difficult to hire?

If employers are experiencing problems in filling specific job requirements from within the community or commuting region, the community can be supportive by tailoring its marketing strategy to target those types of workers. This can be done by referring to what is known about the community characteristics that attracted recent newcomers, especially newcomers who possess the skills required by the local labor market.

For instance, if local employers indicate that it is difficult to attract college-educated managers to the jobs they are offering, the community marketing plan should take into account the amenities that have been identified by new residents with college credentials and emphasize those amenities in the community's website or other marketing efforts.

So, how does one learn these things about the local labor market? The short answer is: Ask the employers. That may be even easier than it sounds. In many communities local development groups often sponsor business retention and expansion (BR&E) programs that are designed to learn how the community can support its local businesses.

Traditionally, BR&E programs are designed to identify zoning or infrastructure issues that can be addressed to the benefit of employers. However, the same process can easily include a few questions about the labor market to better inform the community marketing effort.

If there is no BR&E program in your community (and there should be), the marketing committee can collect the necessary information by organizing a "Business Walk." This includes scheduling interviews with some of the area's larger and more representative employers. As long as the questions asked do not involve confidential business matters, employers should welcome the inquiries. After all, if the community can make relocation decisions easier, it may make the hiring process easier, faster, and less expensive.

If you have not conducted a Business Walk before, the process is not complicated. The following information is a guide to organizing a Business Walk. The guide has a set of suggested questions, including those most relevant to a marketing effort to attract new residents.

What Is a Business Walk?

A Business Walk is a day dedicated to learning more about your local businesses through face-to-face interviews on their turf. Local leaders visit each business with the hopes of gathering the knowledge they need to help their community and strengthening relationships. University of Wisconsin-Extension, Grant County, uses the responses to those interviews to generate a simple, easy-to-read report that decision makers can use to help strengthen their local businesses.

The walk also can be a celebration of local businesses held in conjunction with an existing celebration or it can be a new event.

Why Walk?

- To understand the issues facing your business community.
- To build working relationships between decision makers and local businesses.
- To celebrate and promote your local businesses.
- To provide local businesses with educational resources.

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The Business Walk Guide

Because every community is different, the guide is meant as a road map, not a formula.

Here are the eight steps of the guide:

- Step 1: Who's In Charge?
- Step 2: Who's with Me?
- Step 3: Save the Date
- Step 4: Plan the Walk
- Step 5: Talk the Talk
- Step 6: Walk the Walk
- Step 7: Find Your Story
- Step 8: Tell Your Story

Step 1: Who's in Charge?

Which community member will serve as the point person for the walk? Is it a member of the marketing committee, the chamber director, mayor, village president, council member, board member, or a business person? It should be someone who represents the community at-large and has the skills to rally troops and deploy resources.

Step 2: Who's with Me?

The Business Walk is a simple program, but it does require some planning. The person in charge of orchestrating the program must have support. This is largely a communications and event planning exercise, so choose your team accordingly. Some folks are "thinkers" and some folks are "doers". You'll need both.

Step 3: Save the Date

Community calendars are already full of activities throughout the year. Choose a date that can either stand alone or piggyback onto an existing celebration. Once you select a date, get the word out to the community, especially to the businesses you plan to visit.

Step 4: Plan the Walk

Sit down with your team and determine the resources you'll need to make your walk a success. Here are some things to consider:

- **Walkers:** How many people will you need to effectively meet and speak with each of your businesses in a day? Typically, teams of two

people are given a certain number of employers to meet with in a designated time frame.

- **Schedule:** There are several things to consider for the day. What works well for your business owners? What works well for the media? And, what works well for your team? Make sure that the emphasis remains on the business owners. The walk is meaningless without their participation. Ask each business owner what works best for him or her. If needed, divide the area into morning and afternoon walks and use the lunch hour to meet and compare notes.
- **Press:** Make sure the local newspaper and TV and radio stations are aware of your event. If possible, have a member of the media follow a team to take pictures and document the day.
- **Gifts:** Show your appreciation to your local businesses. If you have the resources, leave a gift, a card, or at least some literature on how you plan to use the information they provide. Some communities bring gift bags that include gift cards and educational materials for local businesses.

Step 5: Talk the Talk

For your walk to be a success, you'll need to spend time marketing it. The purpose of your marketing efforts is three-fold:

- To generate positive "buzz" to encourage participation.
- To promote the role of the local businesses in defining the community.
- To promote the role of local leadership in strengthening local businesses.

Some methods you may want to consider:

- Traditional media: Newspaper, radio, TV, postcards, utility bills, and newsletters.
- Electronic media: Facebook, websites, Twitter, and electronic newsletters.
- Guerilla marketing: Nonconventional approaches to getting the word out. (One example might be to host a student coloring or photo contest to generate materials for posters, stickers, flyers, playing cards, etc.)



Note: It's best to let your local business owners know what to expect ahead of time. Please feel free to share with them the purpose of the walk, how you intend to use the results of the walk, and the list of 16 questions.

Step 6: Walk the Walk

Spend the day meeting with your local business owners in their stores, shops, and restaurants. The walk works best if you travel in teams of two and use a survey form. Once the team walks into a business, the primary walker shakes hands, perhaps has a photo taken, and asks the first three questions:

1. How's business?
2. What do you like about doing business here?
3. What can we do to help you succeed?

The secondary walker takes notes and asks the 13 follow-up questions:

4. How long have you been in business here?
5. What type of business is this?
6. Where is most of your competition?
7. Where do you purchase most of your supplies and support services?
8. How much does your business rely on the Internet?
9. How many full-time and part-time employees do you have and how will that change over the course of the year?
10. How do you recruit new workers?
11. What workforce skills are needed?
12. What workforce skills are difficult to recruit?
13. What technology-related skills are needed?
14. Is there a need for specialized skills, e.g., managerial skills or operation of specialized machinery?
15. What type of local employee training, if any, would you like to see offered?
16. Does your business/company have difficulty finding employees in any of the following groups?

Skilled Trades – Specify

Unskilled Labor – Specify

Other – Specify

Step 7: Find Your Story

After finishing your walk, sit down with the marketing committee and local development leaders

and discuss the findings. Look for common themes or areas of specific importance to the business owners who have been interviewed.

Step 8: Share Your Story

It is important to share your report with your stakeholders. This may include local business owners, elected officials, chambers of commerce, and the general public.

This is only a reporting function. The next step is to take action based on the outcomes of your walk.

Step 9: Compare the labor force needs of local businesses to your marketing strategy. Are there businesses in your community that are having difficulty recruiting certain types of employees?

Think back to the focus groups and interviews with new residents that you have conducted.

- What has attracted similar workers or skill sets to your community in the past?
- Is it reasonable to think that the same characteristics would attract similar workers?
- Can you think of a way to emphasize the skills required locally on your community's website?

Summary

By “walking the walk” and “talking the talk,” you can not only find ways to improve your marketing strategy, but also help cement the relationship between community development and the business community one relationship at a time.

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Permission was granted to use and adapt materials developed by Todd W. Johnson, Grant County Community Resource Development Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

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