

FLORIDA CHAMBER

Foundation

**FLORIDA WORKFORCE
NEEDS STUDY 2.0**

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"Talent is quickly replacing the tax incentive as the most important economic development tool in the toolkit."

MARK WILSON

President,
Florida Chamber Foundation

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Researching Employer Needs on the Road to Building America's Top Workforce

Aligning future job skills and job training is Florida's competitive advantage

FLORIDA CONTINUES TO EXPERIENCE RAPID GROWTH in GDP, population and jobs. Already the 3rd largest state in terms of population, Florida has recently surpassed New York in the number of non-farm payroll employees. Strong in-migration of people and income – Florida welcomes \$4.48 million of household net income every hour – has boosted the growth rate of the nation's 4th-largest economy to the 3rd-fastest in the nation (fastest among large states).

Leaders across Florida are increasingly seizing the opportunity to leverage our economic growth into targeted and sustained economic development opportunities that further diversify and grow Florida's economy. Florida already has America's top-rated colleges and universities, and our research aims to maximize the efficiency of our post-secondary talent systems and productivity of our workforce as key strategies towards those distinct but interlinked ends.

The research culminated in the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 2.0** establishes a baseline “state of play” regarding essential workforce needs – building on previous Florida Chamber Foundation research to understand the skills gaps across important strategic and operational industries and occupations – insights were gained directly from employers across Florida, to help educators, policymakers, and future workers alike understand the talent needed to meet the Florida moment, and secure Florida's future.

The Florida Chamber Foundation's **Florida 2030 Blueprint**, which launched in 2018 with the input of more than 10,000 Floridians across all 67 counties, is a strategic plan to guide Florida's continued growth and economic development. In order to create prosperity and high paying jobs in each of Florida's 983 zip codes, maintain and nurture vibrant and resilient communities, and drive momentum toward global competitiveness, the **Florida 2030 Blueprint** identifies 39 goals,



organized under the Six Pillars Framework aimed at making Florida the 10th largest economy in the world by 2030.

This research builds upon the **Florida 2030 Blueprint ‘Talent Supply & Education’** goals which are monitored via TheFloridaScorecard.org and highlighted annually at the Florida Learners to Earners Workforce Summit. Within the ‘Talent Supply & Education’ pillar, six “cradle to career” goals exist, each essential to the overall success of creating the world’s best workforce and growing Florida into a top 10 global economy by the year 2030. **The Florida Workforce Needs Study 2.0** addresses two of these six goals:

1. Ensuring that more than 60% of Floridians 25-64 have a high-value postsecondary certificate, degree, or training experience, and
2. More than 80% of Florida’s workforce has essential employability skills.

How do we move forward?

The Florida Chamber Foundation’s Future of Work Florida Initiative is championing the value of skilled workers, creating awareness of career possibilities and pathways, and serving as a statewide leader to unite businesses, workforce, and education partners. Advisory Board members meet throughout the year to set a strategy and vision for expanding work-based learning, identifying in-demand industry certifications and apprenticeships, generating student interest in high-demand fields, and various other projects to improve employability skills. This timely initiative supports Florida’s 60% attainment goal and achieves this by actively addressing employers’ concerns about the skills gaps in high-demand occupations.

Over the past year, for every 100 open jobs, only 86 Floridians are looking for work

Where do we stand?

Currently, 54.5% of Florida’s working-age population (the cohort ages 25-64) have a post-secondary credential, which is 5.5 percentage points short of the 60% credential attainment goal in the Florida 2030 Blueprint.

Florida’s economy needs to create more than 1.3 million new jobs by 2030 and employers – whether through anonymous surveys or confidential focus groups and interviews – express their inability to find qualified workers for open positions. These skills gaps are both technical (knowledge-based) and general (employment or “soft” skills). Over the past year, for every 100 open jobs, only 91 Floridians are looking for work, evidence that work still needs to be done to ensure that more than 80% of Florida’s workforce has the skills to satisfy the current workforce needs.

It is the hope of the Florida Chamber Foundation that the Florida business community, workforce and education partners, and policymakers will continue

working collaboratively to leverage the insights shared in the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 2.0** to better align education and training curriculum to career opportunities and industry needs. This collaborative approach will give Florida's current and future talent, and job creators alike, the best opportunity to succeed as we work to create America's BEST workforce in Florida.



MARK WILSON

President, Florida Chamber Foundation

Mark Wilson



DON KISELEWSKI

Chair, Florida Chamber Foundation

Executive Director, Florida Power & Light Company

Don Kiselewski

85.9% of employers

*plan to hire new
employees in
the next year*

Executive Summary

TO GROW THE FLORIDA'S ECONOMY to the 10th-largest in the world by 2030, Florida businesses need to operate at full productivity with adequate access to labor and capital. However, Florida's low unemployment rate and high demand for labor has created challenges for employers looking for qualified workers. Statewide surveys, employer focus groups, and other Chamber Foundation research conducted to inform this study revealed that the majority of Florida's employers have had trouble recruiting qualified applicants, and most plan to hire new employees in the next year.

The talent acquisition and retention process continues to see its share of challenges, with employers struggling to identify and hire candidates. Employers seek a wider and deeper talent pool, with most occupations requiring degrees or credentials beyond a high school diploma. Soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, are also in high demand.

The employer focus groups for this study were conducted to gather insights on the challenges faced by job creators in Florida. Participants validated the survey findings and shared their experiences with recruiting and retaining workers. Employers of manufacturing, construction, and skilled trades indicated that the gaps in the talent pool were likely larger as their positions are rarely posted online, but rather are advertised by word of mouth or non-digital ads.

The Master Credentials List (MCL), in partnership with CareerSource Florida, was also discussed during the focus groups, with employers sharing their thoughts on the credentials relevant to their hiring needs. The MCL serves as a guiding resource for educational institutions and business leaders to ensure that students are earning credentials that meet the workforce needs of the current and future economy. While reviewing and providing feedback on the current MCL in our focus groups, employers identified a lack of basic employability skills among incumbents and a need for non-credentialed skills. They also shared examples of successful partnerships between employers and educators. Employers with more resources, such as larger amounts of staff, as well as highly engaged employers, typically had positive experiences.

86.9% of employers
*struggled to recruit
candidates for
open positions*

The Master Credentials List serves as a public and transparent inventory of state-approved credentials of value, directs the use of federal and state funds for workforce education and training programs that lead to approved credentials of value, and guides workforce education and training programs by informing the public of the credentials that have value in the current or future job market.

-CareerSource Florida



What to expect in this study

The study outlines three key strategies to enhance the delivery of a workforce ready to accelerate Florida's economic growth:

- Consistently engage employers to refine Florida's MCL, meeting employers where they are.
- Facilitate partnerships between Florida's smaller employers and post-secondary institutions.
- Enhance the marketing and facilitation of training grants, to ensure awareness and utilization of funds available for that purpose, through existing business support networks.

In conclusion, working together, Florida's business community, elected officials, educators, and workforce intermediaries can make a difference in addressing the state's workforce challenges, while helping us make strides toward achieving study-related goals outlined in the **Florida 2030 Blueprint**.

*Florida Workforce
Needs Study 1.0
identified four target
career areas **provide
average annual
wages \$20,000
above Florida's
average annual wage***

Recent Florida Chamber Foundation Workforce Research

THIS **FLORIDA WORKFORCE NEEDS STUDY 2.0** builds upon a body of research conducted to better understand the extent of existing skills gaps not only across a wide range of occupations and job types, but also across industries essential to a thriving Florida economy. The Florida Chamber Foundation has led several research projects over its 50-plus year history and has focused much of its research on identifying leaks and clogs in the talent pipeline. Two recent reports, the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 1.0** and the **Florida Trade & Logistics 2030 Study**, identified key industries with top in-demand occupations, providing Florida's job creators, education and workforce leaders, and policymakers with actionable insights for closing the skills gaps in the current and future workforce. The insights gained on the key industries and occupations identified in these reports serve as the focus of the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 2.0**.

Florida Workforce Needs Study 1.0 (2021)

This report, released in the early days of pandemic recovery, provided a comprehensive look at the skills Floridians need to possess to shift from oversupplied occupations to in-demand occupations with more demand than supply – and higher wages.

The study examined four target career areas:

 **Healthcare**

 **IT/Math**

 **Business/Finance**

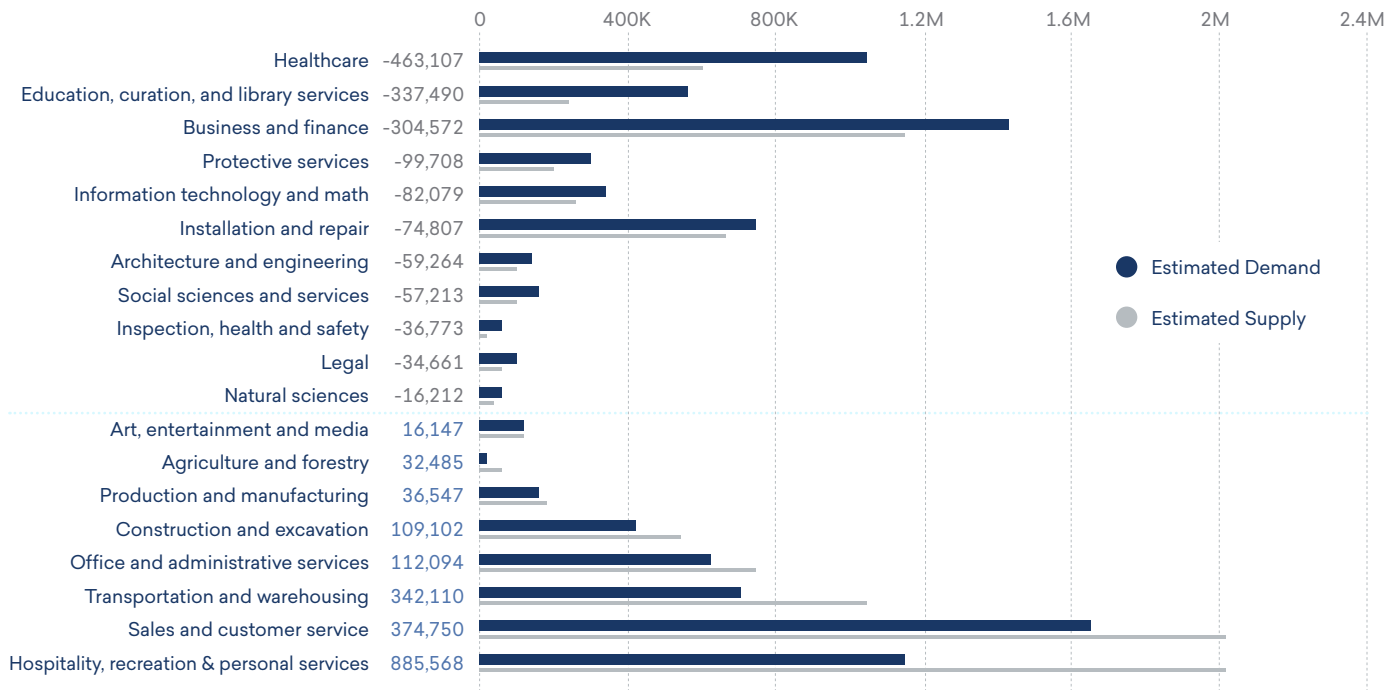
 **Architecture/Engineering**

Healthcare, Business/Finance, IT/Math, and Architecture/Engineering – found through in-depth analysis were found to show promise of advanced wages and long-term resiliency. However, these target career areas also saw the largest talent shortages seen in **Figure 1**.



FIGURE 1: ESTIMATED SUPPLY AND DEMAND BY CAREER AREA IN FLORIDA

Career areas in order of greatest supply-demand gap (negative number indicating shortage, positive number indicating surplus)



Data at time of Florida Workforce Needs Study 1.0 Release

Comparing job postings and online profiles of talent, the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 1.0** quantified skills gaps for each of the target four career areas and provided potential career transitions (transferring from one industry to another) based on relevant common skills and opportunities for upskilling.

Recognizing that most education and training policy occurs statewide, but that labor markets largely exist within economically connected regions, the study produced nine metro-level skills reports to inform specific local and regional strategies and initiatives.

Florida Trade & Logistics Study 2030 (2022)

This study, the third in a series of impactful research reports over the course of a decade related to the movement and shipment of goods and people, concluded that increasing Florida's manufacturing output is the first step in leveraging several major infrastructure investments put into place since 2010. To move more, Florida must make more.

While the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 1.0** research criteria did not specifically surface the manufacturing sector in its analysis, the manufacturing sector is vital to Florida's economic competitiveness and resiliency. The manufacturing industry will only grow as far as the available talent pool will allow and in order to meet the Florida 2030 Blueprint goal of making Florida a top five state for manufacturing employment, strategic avenues for job opportunities in this sector must be explored.



Three Key Questions Facing Florida's Job Creators

FOR FLORIDA TO GROW ITS ECONOMY to the 10th largest in the world by 2030, Florida businesses will need to operate at full productivity and have access to both factors of production – labor and capital. While Florida's monthly unemployment rate has averaged 3.0% since January 2022, the labor market continues to approach full employment, which has placed pressure on the demand side of the market. Month-to-month during that timeframe, the labor market was 29.3% lower than employer demand. Currently, for every 100 jobs employers seek to create, only 91 workers exist. This situation is typically more pronounced in large counties central to Florida's major economic regions. To understand more granularly the talent acquisition landscape among Florida job creators, this research effort launched statewide surveys and a series of employer focus groups.

Employer Survey

Statewide surveys of employers conducted in late 2022 and early 2023 revealed several eye-opening data points that quantified the labor market challenges facing job creators.

When asked “Over the past year, has your company had trouble recruiting qualified applicants for open positions?” 86.9% of respondents indicated either “yes” or “yes, dependent on position.” Compounding the issue of recruiting hurdles, 85.9% of employers surveyed answered “Yes” to the question “Is your company planning to hire new employees over the next year?” Breaking down the talent acquisition and retention process into subcomponents, most employers indicated conditions had deteriorated, and few employers exhibited optimism that conditions will improve.

Asked to reflect on the past half year, a majority of employers suggested that candidate identification, securing interviews and hiring had gotten progressively more challenging. Additionally, tight labor markets elevated the marketability of their incumbent employees and employee retention became more difficult. Asked to look ahead, vast majority (93% or more) of employers replied that each of these steps would either remain as is or get worse.

FIGURE 2: EMPLOYER DIFFICULTY RECRUITING QUALIFIED APPLICANTS

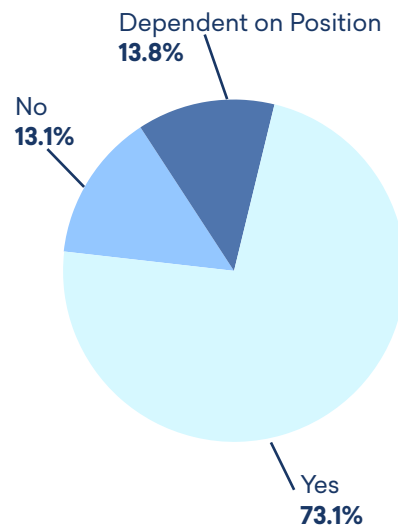


FIGURE 3: EMPLOYER INTENTION TO HIRE NEW EMPLOYEES IN THE NEXT YEAR

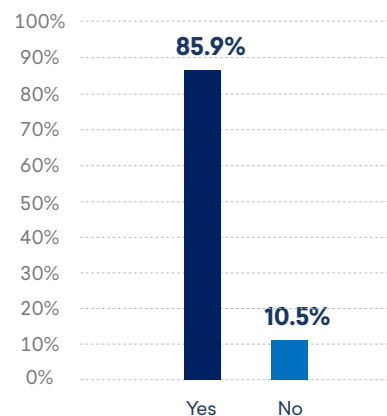


TABLE 1 – EMPLOYER EVALUATION OF FUTURE TALENT ACQUISITION AND RETENTION DIFFICULTIES

Talent Acquisition/ Retention Stage	Past Six Months: “Gotten Worse”	Next Six Months: “Worse” + “The Same”
Candidate Identification	63.0%	96.3%
Securing Interviews	69.4%	93.6%
Hiring	72.4%	93.5%
Employee Retention	54.2%	93.1%

A follow-up survey indicated that this difficulty in filling open jobs amidst plans to expand was experienced across a variety of industries and occupations. The list of Florida’s most in-demand occupations, as measured by online job postings, reinforces this sentiment.

Among these top 20 occupations, nine generally require degrees or credentials beyond the high school diploma, and even those that do not would benefit from formal (i.e. -safety training) and informal (i.e. – digital skills, leadership) skill development. In short, very few – if any – jobs in the modern economy can be filled by an unskilled labor force.

Top Talent Acquisition Challenges

- Difficulty meeting salary expectations
- Increased competition for talent
- Workforce skills/knowledge
- Lack of access to affordable housing
- Candidate location preferences (in-person/remote/hybrid)
- Lack of awareness of open positions
- Lack of access to childcare
- Lack of access to transportation
- General COVID-19 related issues

TABLE 2 – FLORIDA’S TOP 20 ADVERTISED OCCUPATIONS, MAY 2024

Occupation	Frequency Advertised	Occupation	Frequency Advertised
Registered Nurses	18,112	First-Line Supervisors of Office and Administrative Support Workers	5,160
Retail Salespersons	15,441	Medical and Health Services Managers	4,836
Customer Service Representatives	8,880	Food Service Managers	4,792
First-Line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	8,443	Waiters and Waitresses	4,479
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants ¹	6,425	Medical Assistants	4,264
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing ²	6,139	Sales Representatives of Services ³	4,089
Fast Food and Counter Workers	5,962	Laborers and Freight/Stock/ Material Movers, Hand	4,050
General and Operations Managers	5,663	Receptionists and Information Clerks	3,900
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	5,454	Janitors and Cleaners ⁴	3,746
Maintenance and Repair Workers, General	5,321	Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing, Technical and Scientific Products	3,671

1 Except Legal, Medical, and Executive

2 Except Technical and Scientific Products

3 Except Advertising, Insurance, Financial Services, and Travel

4 Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners

Generally Requires Post-Secondary Education



When asked to rank in order specific challenges faced in the recruiting, hiring, and retention process, survey responses centered around factors descriptive of the tight labor market – compensation expectations amidst a highly competitive hiring environment topped the list. Workforce skills/knowledge was a very close third. From survey responses, it is clear Florida’s job creators seek a wider and deeper talent pool for their organizations.

Employer Focus Groups

Informed by this survey data, a series of employer focus groups convened across Florida in 2023. Six in-person sessions were held, and two additional sessions were conducted in a virtual format. Employers of the following occupational groups were targeted for participation:

- Information Technology
- Business/Finance/Professional Services
- Healthcare
- Manufacturing/Construction/Skilled Trades.

Sessions were scheduled so that employers of the four occupational groups would meet separately. In total, the effort engaged 117 Florida employers across 30 sessions. A typical focus group size of under 10 employers permitted an open and robust dialogue. The knowledge gained from these groups was not only from individual responses, but as a result of interaction between employers with similar experiences.

The general format of each focus group included an overview of the **Florida 2030 Blueprint** and how the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 2.0** advances the strategic plan. Facilitators reviewed the survey findings with the participants and received reactions. The balance of the meeting included a review of and reaction to the Master Credentials List, discussions around best practices in industry-education partnerships, and cataloguing the employers’ experiences – if any – with accessing and utilizing state and federal workforce training grants. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and openly with a guarantee of confidentiality from the research team and facilitators.

Survey Validation

When reflecting on survey findings, employer participants largely validated the results. Typical feedback underlined the particular difficulties in recruiting – this is where facilitators noted the greatest variation across the occupational groups. Reflecting on the open jobs ratio (the comparison of unemployed persons to online job postings), employers of manufacturing/construction/skilled trades

“Roofers aren’t on Indeed”

– Construction Employer



“Travel nursing used to be temporary to fill need in periods of high demand. But now it is a permanent fixture, my company has to hire them. They steal the workforce to rent them back to the industry.”

– Healthcare Employer

workers indicated the gaps were likely larger as few, if any, of their positions are posted online.

Employers of registered nurses, the occupation perennially most in-demand according to online job postings, shared their post-pandemic recruitment challenges, specifically pertaining to their increased usage of staffing firms for “travel” nurses. This shift in talent acquisition, according to several participants, has affected recruitment, retention, and ultimately their budgets. Nationally, the average pay for travel nurses has been \$150 per hour, increasing staffing shortages as nurses leave staff jobs in Florida for this higher pay. Across the country, contract labor expenses have increased 250% over three years – and healthcare employers in Florida echoed this burden in their own increased costs.

Current/Emerging Skills Needs

Participants were provided excerpts from the Master Credentials List (MCL) relevant to their hiring needs in advance of the meeting and asked to reflect on credentials incorporated therein. Few employers had any pre-existing knowledge of the MCL prior to their registration for the listening session. The MCL was codified in statute via House Bill 1507, or the 2021 REACH Act, to support the state’s goal of becoming the number one state in workforce education by 2030. The MCL currently includes lower-division post-secondary degree programs (associate of science and associate of applied science degrees), post-secondary non-degree programs (career certificates, college credit certificates, applied technology diplomas and advanced technical certificates), apprenticeships, industry certifications, and K-8 CAPE digital tools.

The universe of credentials offered in Florida are evaluated against criteria for workforce demand and non-degree credentials are also evaluated against a baseline wage threshold. Credentials aligned to occupations that meet the demand (all credentials) and the wage threshold (non-degree credentials only) are included in the MCL that is updated annually through collaboration between CareerSource Florida, the Florida Department of Education and the Florida Department of Commerce. Credentials that do not meet the established criteria can be petitioned on a quarterly basis for inclusion on the MCL based on additional workforce demand information submitted by local workforce boards or educational institutions, and these applications may be developed in collaboration with local employers. Credentials that appear on the MCL are eligible for performance incentive funding, such as CAPE funding for industry certifications. This funding incentivizes districts, colleges and universities to offer training for those industry certifications and can also subsidize the fees paid by students to third-party certifying entities to test for a certification.

There was little sentiment among participants to cull the list, i.e. to remove credentials, and only sporadic suggestions for additions. These suggestions

*“We need to plant a flag today that we will **stop calling them soft skills – they are not fluffy, they are essential** and absolutely necessary to being a good human and a good employee.”*

– IT Employer

*“**A few years ago, we wouldn’t take any graduates from our local technical college because they were not prepared** when they graduated. Then we helped advise on the curriculum and now the students are prepared and our health system hires their graduates.”*

– Healthcare Employer

were typically very specific, such as certifications in particular manufacturing processes (composites or other additive manufacturing, for example) or more curricular in nature – IT employers suggesting particular programming languages be emphasized in existing degree or certificate programs.

More frequently than not, participants noted a perceived lack of basic employability skills – punctuality, accountability, numeracy and literacy – among the current talent pool, while acknowledging that labor market conditions may contribute to their perceptions. Employers also contributed to the discussion by mentioning non-credentialed skills such as communication, teamwork, time-management and problem solving. These workforce needs – commonly referred to as “soft skills” – are discussed in a separate section of this study, yet they warrant mention here due to the frequency which participants statewide offered commentary.

Industry-Education Partnership Best Practices

Having discussed the state of both credentialed and non-credentialed skills, facilitators elicited comments from the participants regarding examples of successful partnerships between employers and educators to generate higher-quality candidates more prepared to contribute as productive employees. Few employers provided specific examples from their own experience. Those with best practices to share typically fell into two groups: larger employers and highly engaged employers, for example, those who serve on an advisory board for a particular academic or career training program and/or participate in an industry association. According to the participants, larger employers generate significant interest from education partners due to the emphasis on “in-field” employment as part of the accountability measures and the number of openings and hires a larger employer typically generates. Several smaller employers indicated aggregating or “pooling” their requirements and needs – through an industry association, for example – generated positive workforce results.

One key industry differentiator emerged: employers in the manufacturing, construction, and skilled trades job cluster conveyed a clear sentiment that the centralization of career and technical education offerings – moving programs out of general education high schools into technical colleges – across Florida’s school districts over the past 30 years has limited the number and share of students exposed to skilled trades and production technology curricula – what those employers described as “shop class.” Collectively, they expressed that the current centralized approach inhibits students from exploring these activities on an ad hoc basis.

The Florida Chamber Foundation’s Future of Work Initiative has studied the Top 30 In-Demand Careers by 2030 and have found many to be in the manufacturing industry, such as carpenters, electricians, construction managers, and heating,

“Students can explore the arts with one class. If they want to explore construction, they are told to commit to a program and go to a technical college half the day or a magnet school across town.”

– Construction Employer

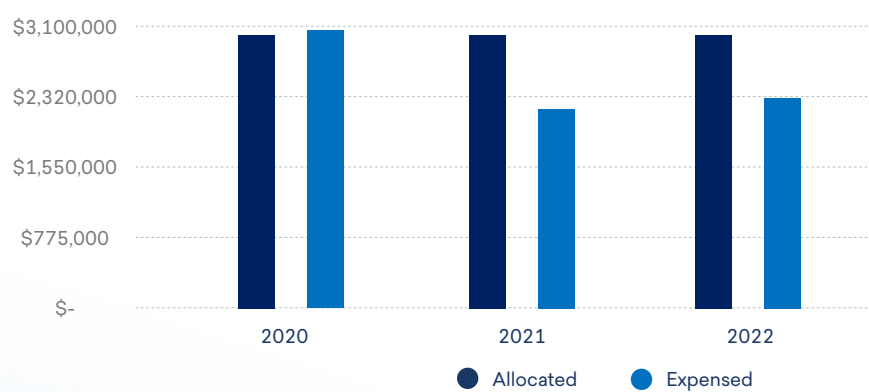
air conditioning & refrigeration mechanics & installers. Recognizing that the centralized approach these employers talked about has led to limited interest in these crucial careers, the Future of Work Florida Initiative works to generate awareness of these well-paying, high demand careers, often at the high school level.

Training Resource Utilization

Participants were provided an overview of available resources, with a primary focus on CareerSource Florida’s Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) program. Consistent with previous survey results, there was general awareness of these programs but little utilization among employers. This is consistent with state funding and expenditure trends in the IWT program. Over the past three fiscal years, utilization rates have averaged 84%, meaning that \$16 of every \$100 set aside for training and upskilling of employees has gone untouched. When fiscal year 2020 (pandemic year) is excluded, the utilization rate drops to 75%. There is a key opportunity for employers to improve their bottom line and increase the skill levels of their employees by tapping into these unspent funds.

Two key trends emerged from the focus groups. One, larger employers such as multi-state corporations and major health systems were more likely to have utilized training grant programs, due to more robust human resources departments with sufficient bandwidth to pursue the funding. And two, for those smaller employers who had used the IWT program, they benefitted from the services of a “navigator” who assisted with raising awareness, completing the application, and the required reporting for reimbursement. Navigators typically came in the form of economic developers, workforce development professionals, and industry association staff.

FIGURE 4: INCUMBENT WORKER TRAINING UTILIZATION



Soft Skills Gap

NEARLY 90% OF FLORIDA'S WORKFORCE LEADERS have informed the Florida Chamber Foundation that they have struggled to find qualified talent. Through the surveys and employer focus groups, the Florida Chamber Foundation has learned that soft skills are of particular interest to Florida's employers.

Soft skills are the foundation of employability. They help people transfer from job to job and industry to industry. Yet, they are extremely difficult to define and, as employer feedback has revealed, difficult to train on. Teaching someone to be a better communicator is much more nuanced than teaching a person how to pull a sales report or operate machinery on a factory floor.

Florida's employers have suggested there may be a soft skills gap in Florida's workforce, especially in a post-pandemic labor market. These sentiments are not unique to Florida, nor this is the first time that employers have reported struggling to find workers with the right soft skills. The difference this time around appears to be the rate of change and the acceleration in need caused by the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Florida Chamber Foundation works closely with employers, higher education providers, and workforce training across Florida to provide data-driven insights that allow institutions to advance the hard and soft skills needed to narrow Florida's workforce skills gap. This section – excerpted from a stand-alone report conducted as part of the **Florida Workforce Needs Study 2.0** research effort - specifically focuses on the soft skills needed by Florida's employers and introduces the challenges of defining and measuring the soft skills gap that exists in the state-wide talent pool. This discussion aims to answer the following three questions in service of creating a broader understanding of the soft skills gap.

1. What is a soft skill and a skills gap?
2. What are the top soft skills sought after by Florida's employers?
3. And finally, how does the soft skills gap manifest in Florida's workforce?

1 What is a soft skill and a skills gap?

Soft skills are any non-credentialed and non-degreed skills that are important across multiple occupation types and industries. Soft skills are the skills that transfer from industry to industry, from warehouse to office to the field, and make people considerably more employable. A skills gap happens when there is a mismatch between the skills employers are looking for and the skills workers possess.



2 What are the top soft skills sought after by Florida employers?

Job posts are real-time signals of the skills that employers need and how they are feeling about their prospects recruiting in the current labor market. A 2015 Burning Glass report (now Lightcast) noted, “Every job ad is a window into the real world of the labor market because it forces employers to articulate, in their own words, what they need from workers and how they expect to get it. A job ad has real stakes attached.”

This is why recent advances transforming millions of online job posts into usable datasets offer the opportunity to uncover the very specific and immediate needs of Florida’s employers. Job post data can be analyzed to understand the top soft skills Florida’s employers seek.

The first major takeaway from a dataset on Florida job posting activity: there is a set of universal soft skills that all employers need. Despite examining job post data for six mutually-exclusive occupation groups, a set of 18 soft skills appeared consistently as the top skills needed by employers, no matter which group was being analyzed.

- The top universal soft skill needed is general communication. More specifically, writing, coordinating, interpersonal communication, and verbal communication also appear on the list. *(5 soft skills)*
- Working with others is also a widespread need: management, customer service, leadership, and teamwork appear to be needed in all job types assessed. *(4 soft skills)*
- Other themes include self-organization and accountability, expressed through necessary skills such as organizational skills, self-motivation, [being] detail-oriented, multitasking, time management, planning, professionalism, and [having] ethical standards and conduct. *(8 soft skills)*
- Finally, the last major need garnered from the 18 universal skills is general problem-solving. *(1 soft skill)*

3 How does the soft skills gap manifest in Florida’s workforce?

Analysis of job posting data and interviews with Florida employers reveal that the soft skills gap has no simple solution. Many of the labor market inefficiencies employers experience come down to poor communication between potential employees and employers. Individuals do not know how to properly highlight their skills and employers do not properly know how to vet them. Trends created or accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic have shifted employee expectations, and

“Every job ad is a window into the real world of the labor market because it forces employers to articulate, in their own words, what they need from workers and how they expect to get it. A job ad has real stakes attached.”

employers are still adjusting to those new expectations. Changing technology ends up increasing the level of soft skills needed as workers require a broader grasp of an entire organization's operations to effectively leverage new tech. Finally, employers find that the skills gap not only exists when recruiting new workers but also with their existing employees.

With respect to soft skills, gaps cannot be solved by perfectly training a new generation of incoming workers. It is something that continues to evolve with technology and with each employee's unique experiences. With this in mind, recognizing that there are many small employers grappling with the soft skills gap who do not have the resources to create entire in-house training programs for their workers, there are some simple steps employers of any size can take to help close the soft skills gap.

- Actively recognize the importance of soft skills in job posts and in existing employees' job descriptions. To do this, employers must take the time to think about the soft skills that are most important to them and define how they will be used on the job. This is the opposite of including a laundry list of required soft skills on job posts, which only adds to any confusion about which skills are the most important. Taking the time to make difficult decisions about the most important soft skills and then clearly communicating that through job posts helps potential hires right-size their resumes and prepare for interviews. Clearly communicating important skills to existing employees also helps them prioritize which skills they should be improving upon based on their own career aspirations. This can be done through a fine-tuning of job postings – including only the skills most valuable, which can weed out applicants that only have the more common, general skills.
- Restructure interviews to screen for desired soft skills by asking situational and behavioral questions. Rather than assuming someone has a certain soft skill (or does not have a soft skill) based on their previous experience or job titles, ask the right questions in interviews. Situational questions ask a candidate to explain how they would react given a possible scenario at work. Behavioral questions require asking a candidate to describe a time they have behaved a particular way in the past. Pre-writing these questions, asking them consistently across all interviews, and consistently scoring candidates on a pre-defined rubric creates stability in the hiring process and helps a hiring team discern if a candidate has important soft skills without making assumptions about their abilities.
- Provide existing employees with opportunities to develop their leadership skills before they are promoted to new positions. Interviewed employers clearly noted that there are different soft skills required to be a team leader or manager beyond those soft skills needed in entry-level jobs. Promoting someone who is good at the technicalities of their job to a team leader often

leads to frustration when that employee's skills have not been previously developed for their new role. Providing existing employees with on-the-job opportunities, such as an internal leadership pipeline program, to lead or manage a team before they are offered a new role helps develop their skills in a lower-stakes environment.

The suggestions listed here are just three of the tenets of skills-based practices, a set of hiring, onboarding, and promotion practices championed by organizations such as the Markle Foundation, which help employers and workforce development intermediaries solve their talent development challenges by changing old ways of interviewing and hiring.

Legislative Action Addressing Employers’ Workforce Needs

FLORIDA’S EXECUTIVE AND LEGISLATIVE LEADERS have, in recent years, initiated and – through the efforts of The Florida Chamber, CareerSource Florida and regional workforce boards – implemented two signature pieces of law and associated rule-making that have the potential to transform Florida’s labor pool and employer participation in the process. Additionally, recognizing that workforce shortages manifest as an extension of environmental factors outside of the traditional workforce development ecosystem, Florida’s elected leaders rose to the occasion, passing and signing into law targeted interventions to improve workforce access to housing and addressing fiscal cliffs associated with child health care.

Major Workforce Legislation

HB 1507 aka REACH Act (2021) – the REACH (Reimagining Education and Career Help) Act creates a system-wide approach to improve prosperity for Florida’s learners and workforce. Some activities of District Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, the Florida College System, the State University System, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (now reconfigured as FloridaCommerce), the Florida Department of Children and Families, CareerSource Florida and the regional workforce boards are all coordinated and aligned through the REACH office, housed in the Executive Office of the Governor.

While a variety of prescribed activities, accountability measures, and incentives are included in the law, the aspect that most directly aligns with an employer-led, demand driven approach to improving workforce outcomes for job creators is the establishment of a Credentials Review Committee (CRC), which is appointed and supported by CareerSource Florida. The CRC is chaired by the director of the REACH office and is composed of workforce development ecosystem representatives from urban and rural regional workforce boards, public and private institutions of higher learning, the Florida Department of Education, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, FloridaCommerce, and industry associations. The CRC is charged, by statute, with creating a framework of quality and – under that framework – developing and maintaining



a Master Credentials List (MCL). The practical implications are discussed later in this report.

SB 240 (2023) – this legislation, among several provisions, brings market-based support for career and technical education (CTE) programs. While calling for \$100 million of funding for the creation or expansion of CTE programs, SB 240 more importantly removes funding limitations for CTE credentials and programs of extraordinary value, as measured by higher wages. This market-based approach now allows funding for programs that may require higher start-up and operating costs yet yield credentials in high-demand and higher-wage fields and are cost competitive for districts and colleges to implement.

Focusing on the fact that workforce development differs across a state as large and diverse as Florida is, and that the value of workforce education is rightly dictated by those who hire workers, SB 240 also establishes regional industry and education consortia in each of Florida's regional workforce boards. These consortia, which by law are specifically not to include any members concurrently serving on the region's board of directors, provide a structured and frequent opportunity for employers to provide estimates of demand, describe occupational skill needs, and express other challenges in growing, retaining, and attracting talent.

Ancillary Laws Improving Workforce Outcomes

SB 102 aka Live Local Act (2023) – in recent years, increased gasoline prices and rising housing costs – most acute in job-dense urban areas – have had the effect of limiting employers' labor shed, the area within which employees will reasonably commute for work. The impact of reduced labor sheds is felt most by jobs requiring human interaction, such as hospitality and healthcare. This affordable housing bill provides a number of advantages, such as reduced "red-tape" associated with housing development, and a variety of tax credits. The most significant advantage is the annual, recurring appropriation of \$150 million to the State Apartment Incentive Loan (SAIL) program, via the Florida Housing Finance Corporation (FHFC), through June 30, 2033. SAIL dollars can be used to construct, rehabilitate, and maintain existing affordable units and often are used to leverage additional federal dollars available for affordable housing. In the current context of higher-than-normal costs of capital and significant in-migration, these statutory changes and infusions of dollars will have a positive impact towards increasing the supply of housing available for working Floridians.

“Florida’s path to the 10th largest economy in the world hinges on our ability to equip our workforce with the skills needed in today’s rapidly evolving job market.

By aligning education, training, and policy with industry demands, we can ensure that every Floridian has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to Florida’s success.”

-The Honorable Corey Simon, Chair of the Florida Senate Education PreK-12 Committee, Senate District 3

CS/HB 121 (2023) – this act, related to Florida’s Kidcare program, reduces fiscal cliffs that may impact a worker’s decision to accept a promotion and associated raise. Simply put, a “fiscal cliff” occurs when an individual or household determines that an increase in wage income would eliminate eligibility for certain social safety net programs, such as childcare subsidies, or health care for one’s children, and the net impact to their financial bottom line would deteriorate. Prior to the bill’s passage, a family of two adults and two children earning 200% of the federal poverty level (\$55,000 per year, in 2023) could procure child health insurance coverage for a total premium of \$20 per month, or \$240 per year. Any raise that would move the family above the 200% threshold would eliminate the subsidy and move the family to “full-pay” status resulting in a monthly premium of \$249 per child. A raise less than roughly \$6,000 annually would be “net-negative” to this family’s bottom line. This law went into effect in January 2024, moves the income eligibility threshold to 300% (\$83,250, in our example), where employer-paid or employer-subsidized private health insurance is more likely to be offered at rates more palatable to family budgets. Removing and reducing fiscal cliffs encourages economic mobility and opens entry-level jobs with career pathways, improving workforce outcomes for employers.

Employer-Centric Strategies to Improve Workforce Outcomes

EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS REVEALED limited awareness of the Master Credentials List (MCL), developed by the Credential Review Committee (CRC) to list credentials for training below a baccalaureate level. Going forward, the CRC and industry-education consortia, established by CS/SB 240, will update and enhance the MCL, requiring enhanced and regular employer engagement and online job postings scanning. Existing industry gatherings and professional association networks should be leveraged for feedback on workforce skills needs.

Job creators and educators have aligned interests, with employers seeking productive human capital and educators measuring success by the market applicability of their instruction. While examples of successful industry-education partnerships exist among larger employers, smaller establishments typically lack sufficient ongoing demand for dedicated partnerships. A promising model for aggregating workforce needs is Talent Pipeline Management (TPM), a program by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, involving a network of practitioners across 44 states.

Despite available funds, roughly 16% of CareerSource Florida's Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) grant resources remain unused due to lack of awareness, the complexity of application and reimbursement processes, as well as a tight labor market focus on recruiting and hiring. Economic development organizations (EDOs) play a key role in marketing IWT funds and aligning them with success metrics.

Potential Partners

- Local Chambers
- Economic Development Organizations
- CareerSource Florida and Regional Workforce Boards
- Industry-Education Consortia
- Industry and Professional Associations



Credentials

The employer focus group sessions conducted as part of this research effort elicited clear findings regarding the Master Credentials List (MCL). While it was apparent that very few employers were aware of the effort to develop an MCL for training below the baccalaureate (certificates, apprenticeships, and associate degrees), the Credential Review Committee (CRC) established as part of the REACH Act had succeeded in creating a list of credentials satisfying most, if not all, employer needs within the occupations requiring training below a traditional four-year degree.

Going forward, the CRC and the industry-education consortia, subsequently established by CS/SB 240, are well-positioned to provide updates and enhancements, whether those manifest as deletions from or additions to the MCL. Yet the process of gathering real-time data and input from employers cannot be limited to engaged actors. If Florida's talent development pipeline is to function at the speed of business, enhanced and regular employer engagement, accompanied by ongoing scanning of online job postings is required.

Focus group participants indicated a variety of existing convenings can and should be leveraged to shed light on existing and emerging workforce skills needs. Industry gatherings – such as Florida Chamber Foundation's Florida Technology & Innovation Solution Summit and the SynapseFL for technology-related occupations and summits convened by FloridaMakes for manufacturing – should be targeted for meaningful participant feedback. The Florida Chamber of Commerce and Florida Chamber Foundation Solution Summits create a space for business leaders, education partners, and elected officials to move the needle forward on the challenges and opportunities that they are invested in. Summits such as the Florida Learners to Earners Workforce Solution Summit bring these leaders together to discuss the importance of investing in early learning and closing the skills gaps in the current and future workforce. Leveraging the networks of professional associations such as the Society of Human Resources Professionals (SHRM) at the state and local level are also valuable opportunities to gather new information on talent requirements.

Industry Education Partnerships

Job creators and educators, at the core, have separate yet aligned interests. Employers need productive human capital and educators frequently measure their success – in part – by the market applicability of both technical and general skills developed through their instruction and course delivery. In short, their goals are intertwined.

Policy Makers Should:

Identify partner organizations – professional, occupational, and industry – from which feedback can be gathered and “fast-tracked” into the MCL.

Invest in and/or create feedback mechanisms that allow for meaningful localized feedback and region-specific modifications to the MCL to be made.

“The thing that I love the most about the state college system is not just our responsiveness to the business community; it is the work that we have done to co-create curriculum with input from our workforce partners to make sure that what we offer is not only relevant but timely.”

–Dr. Tonjua Williams, President,
St. Petersburg College

The survey and listening sessions undertaken as part of this research revealed limited yet instructive examples of successful industry-education partnerships. These example partnerships are in place where there is adequate human resource planning and capacity to support these dedicated partnerships, but challenges arise when scaling these solutions to include employers with less resources.

However, the bulk of Florida's employer base are establishments with fewer than 25 employees, and these do not typically generate enough on-going demand to warrant dedicated partnerships, according to employers participating in this research. Collectively, however, smaller employers of hard-to-source skills (especially in manufacturing, construction, and skilled trades) can demonstrate demand in sufficient quantity and can express their workforce need in an amplified voice. One promising model especially geared towards aggregation of workforce needs for particular occupations and skills is Talent Pipeline Management (or TPM), a program developed and promulgated by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Approaching a decade into its existence, the network of TPM practitioners now spans 44 states involving more than 800 individuals, buoyed and bolstered by a well-refined curriculum and playbook for implementation. The curriculum outlines 6 strategies that are key to the success of the workforce efforts, all of which are aligned with the recommendations of this report:

1. Organize for Employer Leadership and Collaboration
2. Project Critical Job Demand
3. Align and Communicate Job Requirements
4. Analyze Talent Supply
5. Build Talent Supply Chains
6. Engage in Continuous Improvement and Resiliency Planning

The TPM Curriculum is a well-established model to implement these promising practices.

Support the decentralization of hands-on career exploration among production and skilled trades and the return of industrial arts to local secondary schools.

Resource Utilization

As workforce skill needs are crystallized through partnerships between Florida's job creators, educational institutions and training partners, the question of funding for upskilling and reskilling of existing employees remains. Fortunately, CareerSource Florida's Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) grant exists to reimburse

Policy Makers Should:

Ensure that relevant laws and workforce development regulations continue to focus on the end-customer – the employer.

Enhance alignment and uniformity of CTE-to-Degree articulation agreements in a system-to-system approach, rather than institution-to-institution, enabling better geographic mobility of talent throughout the state.

“Florida’s public universities are preparing students today for careers of tomorrow and jobs that don’t even exist yet. We work closely with our partners in the business community to ensure our curriculum and programs align with workforce demands and provide our students with the skills needed for success.”

*-Rhea Law, President,
University of South Florida*



a portion of the expense incurred in the course of investing in human capital, and many regional workforce boards have complementary programs.

Yet despite the existence of the funds, roughly 16% of IWT grant resources have gone untouched in recent years. Lack of awareness was found to be the prevailing issue. Those employers who are familiar with the resources, especially smaller establishments with limited bandwidth in their human resources departments, have found the complexity of the grant application and reimbursement processes as daunting obstacles in pursuing funding. Furthermore, the extraordinarily tight labor market has resulted in a heightened focus on the urgent tasks of recruiting and hiring at the expense of important initiatives such as training.

Many of Florida's economic development organizations (EDOs) market the existence of IWT funds to the businesses they serve in their retention efforts. Best-in class EDOs align IWT or other training grant deployment to their success metrics – for what gets measured, generally gets done. By elevating talent pool metrics to the same level as traditional EDO performance measures – projects closed, jobs created, average wages of project jobs, and capital investment – EDOs send a strong signal to their funders, site selectors, and the business community they serve that retention of existing business is just as important as relocation and expansion efforts.

Florida leaders must examine who is taking advantage of state and federally funded grant programs such as Title II of the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act grant (AEFLA-Adult Education & Family Literacy Act), Pathways to Career Opportunities Grant (PCOG), Open Door Grant, etc. Policymakers should invite smaller and rural education providers to the table and work to remove barriers (such as labor-intensive application and reporting processes) that would prevent these entities from applying.

It is also important to prioritize funding for smaller employers in targeted industries, potentially by establishing an initial 60- or 90-day window in the application period for such employers.

Policy Makers Should:

Continue the flow of federal dollars to the IWT grant program, and look to increase the amount as demand dictates.

Continue developing incentives or additional funding streams for skills training leading to high-demand occupations with career pathways.

Explore forward-funding training grants – wherein state dollars pay for an expected grant award to an employer, and are reimbursed through the federal funds, eliminating or reducing burdens experienced by employers related to cash flow and timing of payments.



Summary/ Acknowledgements

BY ANY REASONABLE MEASURE, FLORIDA IS ASCENDING. In terms of raw numbers of people, household formation, net income migration, and GDP growth rate, Florida's growth story in the post-pandemic era has been nothing short of astonishing.

In part due to this growth, Florida stands as the 15th largest economy in the world. To achieve the **Florida 2030 Blueprint** mission of making Florida a top 10 global economy by 2030 however, Florida cannot rely solely on growth - no matter how vigorous. When the number of open jobs is consistently higher than the number of people looking for work, that is a missed opportunity to grow our economy. When employees both new and incumbent suffer deficiencies in both technical and employability skills, that is likewise a missed opportunity.

This study outlines three key strategies to enhance delivery of a workforce ready to accelerate Florida's economic growth:

- Consistently engage employers to refine the state's Master Credentials List, to ensure employees are receiving the skillsets and training employers need.
- Develop consortia, either along regional or industry lines, to facilitate partnerships between Florida's smaller employers and post-secondary institutions.
- Enhance the marketing and facilitation of training grants, to ensure awareness and utilization of funds available for that purpose, through existing business support networks.

Working together, Florida's business community, elected officials, educators, and workforce intermediaries can make significant progress in closing Florida's talent skills gaps. Individuals, organizations, and business leaders can get involved by contacting the Florida Chamber Foundation and joining the Future of Work Florida Initiative. Members become connected to a network of advocates and contribute to tangible initiatives like establishing work-based learning opportunities for students, establishing pipelines for Second Chance hiring (providing employers with resources to hire and provide career advancement to people with criminal records), and advocating for critical industry certifications that meet businesses' needs to be included on the Master Credentials List.

This study would not have been possible without the participation of key stakeholders and partners of the Florida Chamber Foundation.

"I regularly hear about the need for technical skills and soft skills as a member of the Future of Work Florida Advisory Board. The Future of Work Florida Initiative was created to bring together job creators, industry leaders, and partners to showcase the careers of the future and the industries with growth potential."

-Sarah Marmion, Sr. Manager of Education & Outreach Centers, Florida Power & Light Company

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- JAX Chamber
- Florida State College at Jacksonville -Downtown Campus
- St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce
- Coke Florida
- Greater Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce
- CareerSource South Florida
- Miami-Dade College North Campus
- Seminole County Chamber of Commerce
- Seminole State College – Heathrow Campus.

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“ Talent remains the number one tool in Florida’s economic development toolkit, and we continue to have more open jobs than qualified people to fill them.

Florida’s workforce needs are ever-evolving, and this means we need increased collaboration among business leaders, education and workforce development partners, and policymakers to ensure Florida’s talent pipeline is able to meet current and future demands. ”

Mark Wilson

President, Florida Chamber of Commerce & Foundation

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