

BUSINESS EXPERTS SHARE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING D&I AND THE BOTTOM LINE

Local business leaders took a deep dive into corporate diversity and inclusion during a recent panel discussion organized by the Washington Business Journal in partnership with Olney, Md.-based Sandy Spring Bank. Among the topics discussed were the benefits of a diverse workforce in Prince George's County; recruitment and retention challenges and solutions; the vital roles of banking and procurement in promoting diversity and inclusion (D&I); and how a diverse workforce can both serve the community and improve the bottom line. The roundtable event was the second in a two-part series exploring the results of a survey conducted early last year by the Washington Business Journal and Sandy Spring Bank.

Panelists included Nicole Cober, principal managing partner of Cober, Johnson & Romney (CJ&R), a development and legal consulting practice based in Washington, D.C.; Brunson Cooper, president of Corenic Construction Group, a commercial general contractor based in Lanham, Md.; David Iannucci, president and CEO of the Prince George's Economic Development Corp.; Harold Johnson II, a managing partner at CJ&R; and Walter Simmons, president of Employ Prince George's Inc. and director of the county's Workforce Development Board.

Diversity is one of Prince George's County's greatest assets, said Iannucci. The goal now is to get the message out to companies that could move to Prince George's or expand within the county.

"Our challenge is making those companies understand that they have resources in Prince George's County that they ought to be paying a lot more attention to," he said.

Cooper has seen those benefits firsthand at Corenic Construction, which employs people from a variety of cultures and often connects them with the communities they represent.

"You would see the difference when the workforce saw that there's a Hispanic superintendent on the job," he said. "I feel that everyone feels comfortable with someone they can relate to, and I think having that person for every situation has contributed to our growth over the years. We've broken through a lot of doors by having a diverse workforce."

Simmons has noticed a similar D&I trend in healthcare. Employ Prince George's has begun providing English language training for county residents to go into healthcare. The program has a 92 percent job-placement rate, he said, "because the healthcare industry needs workers who can speak multiple languages. We've also done some construction work with the same population in the Langley Park area – another huge placement rate



ABOVE, FROM LEFT:
Nicole Cober, principal managing partner of Cober, Johnson & Romney (CJ&R)

Brunson Cooper, president of Corenic Construction Group

David Iannucci, president and CEO of the Prince George's Economic Development Corp.

LEFT: **Harold Johnson II**, a managing partner at CJ&R

RIGHT: **Walter Simmons**, president of Employ Prince George's Inc. and director of the county's Workforce Development Board Metropolitan Washington



looking at sustainable energy with employers wanting workers who can speak multiple languages, especially at an operations level."

ATTRACTING AND KEEPING DIVERSE TALENT

In a sense, training is a form of recruitment, and panelists discussed several other ways to attract and retain a diverse workforce. Office culture is especially important for Employ Prince George's. As a quasi-governmental agency, Simmons said, the organization can't offer

the pension or benefits that the government can, nor the salaries available in the private sector. However, being mission-driven helps, "because a lot of millennials are mission-driven."

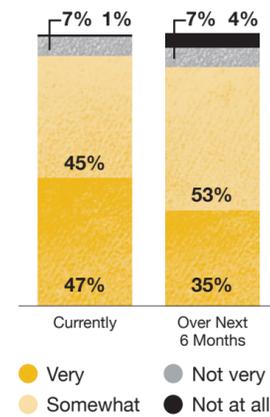
Agency employees also have flexible hours, professional development opportunities and paid volunteer hours. It became clear to the Employ Prince George's chief financial officer that the cost of providing paid volunteer time would pale in comparison to the expense of recruiting and training new

employees to replace those who left because they were unhappy.

Monetary incentives can also make recruitment and retention easier, said Johnson. His company pays a fee to employees at all levels for bringing in new business through their personal or professional network. The fee can be up to 3 percent of the contract's value.

"Also as a small business, we provide healthcare at every level," he said. "And you know, healthcare is expensive, but as a small business we stand out by offering

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STATE OF SMALL BUSINESS SURVEY IN THE SPRING, 2019



At the time the survey was conducted, **almost half** the respondents were very confident they had the talent to run their business. However, only about a third felt confident they had the talent to grow their business over the next 6 months.

some of the best benefits that any large company could provide."

Panelists agreed that social media and an attractive, inclusive website are essential to recruiting a diverse workforce in general and millennials in particular.

Cober has been a trainer for the past five years with the Small Business Administration's incubator program for emerging leaders. Two of the topics she routinely covers are branding and social media.

"One bit of advice I always give business owners is, whatever your personality is as an individual, you need to take that hat off when it comes to social media and put your business hat on," she said. "There's absolutely no reason you wouldn't take advantage of free marketing with a third of the world's population online, right?"

In addition to using social media, Corenic Construction has enhanced its employee referral program for new hires.

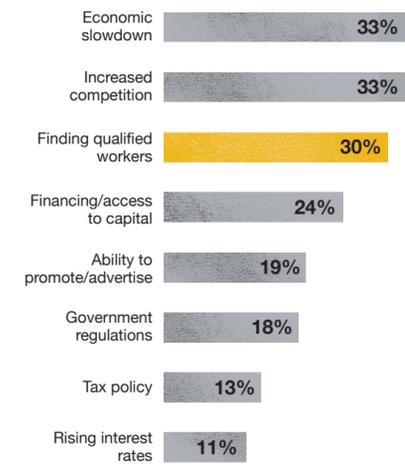
"It used to be small, like \$500," Cooper said. "Now it's up to \$2,000 or \$3,000. I think the best resource for getting new employees is through someone's referral."

The fact that millennials may comprise 50 percent of Maryland's workforce by 2030 provides one more reason why corporate websites should speak to the needs and priorities of that age group, panelists agreed.

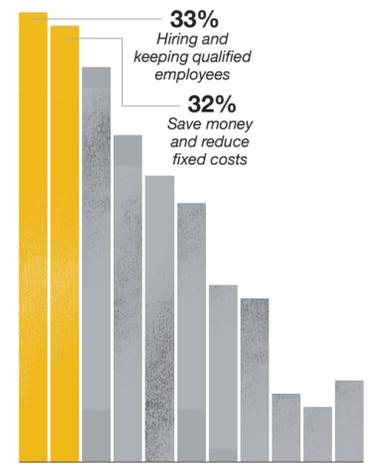
TRANSPORTATION TIPS

Recruiting young, diverse employees is a great start. But what if they don't have their own transportation?

Businesses may need to incur the expense of providing transportation if they want to attract



Minority-Owned Businesses and Women-Owned Businesses said that finding qualified workers is one of their most significant **challenges to growth**.



Hiring and keeping qualified employees and finding ways to save money and reduce fixed costs were seen as **top financial-related challenges**.

and keep young, talented and diverse employees, said Johnson. Otherwise, if a company is located in an area with little or no mass transit, he said, "we may miss somebody who's good, or we may have to pass them up."

Depending on their industry, employees may make frequent client visits or even spend most of their time working offsite. That's the case with Corenic Construction, prompting Cooper to wonder whether the company will need to buy additional vehicles for employees to drive to job sites.

"At the same time, we do encourage them to get a car, because you're really not going to survive in the construction industry without having a vehicle – whether you're a painter, engineer or project manager," he said. "You have to have a vehicle because of the different locations you have to be at."

Iannucci is excited about the Purple Line under construction. The 16-mile light rail line will link Bethesda to New Carrollton, providing a direct connection to Metro's Red, Green and Orange lines as well as MARC, Amtrak and local bus services.

"We see that east-west connectivity potentially very much benefiting Prince George's County," he said, "particularly in the Langley Park area."

CREATING FINANCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Panelists also agreed that, in addition to effective recruitment and solving transportation issues, inclusive banking and procurement policies can improve corporate

diversity and foster economic growth.

Johnson recommends creating relationships among bankers, local governments, and minority- and women-owned businesses. He has seen cases where "the banking relationship was extremely critical to the success of the minority business. I think it's a success all around, and it fosters greater diversity throughout the county and in small businesses."

Iannucci agreed, adding that Prince George's County has played an important role in the past nine years by taking an inclusive perspective on procurement. Any time a construction project uses county funds, "the developer is required to reach absolute minimum requirements of 20 percent or 25 percent participation from local or small, particularly minority, firms," he said. "But it also includes veterans and the disabled, and that's not a negotiable issue."

Also with those kinds of projects, the county seeks a commitment from the employer to meet local

hiring requirements. Depending on the business sector, Iannucci said, that could mean hiring 10 percent to 60 percent of employees locally.

"And when you hire from Prince George's County, you're hiring a diverse workforce," he added, "so we all value that and see it as part of the overall benefit from the role of the county."

Iannucci and other panelists noted positive trends in the county, such as the University of Maryland acting as a powerful economic engine and the fact that Prince

George's County is the fastest-growing county in Maryland in terms of net new jobs. At the same time, the county's unemployment rate has decreased and its commercial tax base has grown by 3 percent, Iannucci said. He added that the General Services Administration will be adding 3,700 jobs in the county, and another 1,200 to 2,000 new county jobs are expected to come from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"All of this is adding up to great optimism for where we're going as a county," he said.

Small businesses play a pivotal role in fueling our local economy. They create jobs, make critical investments in communities and help grow our region. Sandy Spring Bank is a leader in serving the needs of small businesses throughout Greater Washington. That's why the bank partnered with the Washington Business Journal to survey local business owners and decision makers in the Spring of 2019. This advertorial article is focused on exploring solutions to the challenges raised by the business leaders who were surveyed. The leaders who are quoted in this article participated in a roundtable discussion with the Washington Business Journal in November 2019. To learn how Sandy Spring Bank can help your small business grow, please contact Jeff Weidley at 443.570.6773 or jweidley@sandyspringbank.com.