



Jennifer Homer, vice president, Association for Talent Development (ATD)

Employers nationally can't find enough skilled talent

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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Present

Tom Abeles (phone), John Adams, Steve Anderson, David Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz (chair), and Clarence Shallbetter

Summary

Today's interview with Jennifer Homer, vice president, Association for Talent Development (ATD), highlights a major concern of employers nationally, finding skilled talent. More than four out of five employers struggle with finding the qualified employees they need, according to ATD data. Minnesota finds itself competing with all states to retain and attract the workforce needed to grow its economy.

While the state has many advantages, including low unemployment, many companies with headquarters here and highly respected colleges and universities, the job isn't easy, what with many young Minnesotans attracted elsewhere.

Employer and employee groups, education institutions and government entities must collaborate fully with one another to assure they are pulling in the same direction, according to Homer.

Significant assets for Minnesota, Homer said, are its workforce centers located statewide and efforts of the Governor's Workforce Development Council to further strengthen those centers.

Biography

Jennifer Homer, vice president of communications and career development, for the Association for Talent Development (ATD), joined ATD in 1999 to lead the public relations function. Homer continues to lead communication efforts to members and customers, the media, and public policy makers. She also leads ATD's awards programs and [career development](#) offerings.

Homer served a two-year term on the executive board of directors for the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and was president of the IABC Washington, D.C. chapter. She holds IABC's accredited business communicator credential.

She was an adjunct professor at Towson University in Baltimore, MD where she taught public relations writing in 2009.

She has a B.A. in communications from James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA.

Background

The [Association for Talent Development](#) (ATD) is a professional membership organization supporting those who develop the knowledge and skills of employees in organizations around the world. Its members come from corporate, governmental, and non-profit organizations. ATD supports the talent development profession by providing [research](#) , [books](#) , [webcasts](#) , [events](#) , and [education programs](#) . It hosts a variety of conferences several times a year, including an [international gathering](#) for talent development practitioners.

ATD has 115 local chapters in the U.S., including [Minneapolis-St. Paul](#) .

ATD periodically issues a report on the status of gaps between skills of job applicants and skills needed by employers. Its most recent [report](#) is from 2012. In today's interview Jennifer Homer, ATD vice president, provides preliminary data on the 2015 report, to be issued soon.

The Civic Caucus has released two recent statements on human capital: [one in September 2014](#) laying out the human-capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and [a follow-up paper in January 2015](#) offering recommendations for maintaining a high-quality workforce in Minnesota. The Civic Caucus interviewed Jennifer Homer to learn about problems employers are encountering nationally in finding need talent.

Discussion

Employers not finding the skills they need —From its 2015 survey of some 436 talent development professionals, the ATD has found that the vast majority, 84 percent, have skills gaps in their organizations now, Homer said, the same percentage as in its 2012 survey.

The reason, 57 percent of the 2015 respondents said, is the skills of the current workforce don't match changes in company strategy, goals, markets, or business models.

Specific gaps identified —Homer said the top gap is communication/interpersonal skills, followed by managerial/supervisory skills and critical thinking and problem solving. To address the gaps, 64 percent of respondents said they are providing more internal training.

According to its 2012 survey, ATD defines a skills gap as the "point at which an organization can no longer grow or remain competitive because it cannot fill critical jobs with employees who have the right knowledge, skills, and abilities."

ATD findings substantiated by other reports— [The Accenture 2013 Skills and Employment Trends Survey](#) found that nearly one half of large companies wouldn't have the skills needed in the next one to two years, Homer said. The Accenture survey found big consequences if the skills gap is not closed: 66 percent anticipate a loss of business to competitors; 64 percent, loss of revenue; 59 percent, eroding customer satisfaction, and 53 percent, a delay in developing new products or services. In its 2012 survey, ATD cited a [McKinsey Global Institute](#) report projecting major skills shortages worldwide.

Communications and interpersonal skills training are a key need for E-12 schools through universities —Homer said the ATD works mainly with its members who are talent development professionals that provide training and development for their organization's workforce. As part of the discussion during the meeting, those in attendance asked what is meant by communications and interpersonal skills. Homer noted this may mean presentation skills, communication with co-workers and supervisors, and even workplace-specific skills such as running a meeting effectively, getting a message across in an email, and proper use of words, written and oral, among other things. Attention to those skills begins in E-12 schools and continues through university training.

Employer-government-education partnerships are critical — Public-private partnerships are critical in closing the skills gap, Homer said. She cited as an example the University Health System in San Antonio, TX that is highlighted in the ATD's 2012 report on the skills gap. Urgently needing to train more of its English-speaking employees to speak Spanish, the health system successfully contracted with International Language Center of San Antonio and Spanish English Foreign Languages for America.

Minnesota is a good example of effective use of the public workforce system —Homer noted the Governor's Workforce Development Council in Minnesota report early in 2015, "[Minnesota on the Move: The World's Best Workforce](#)". The report recommended several changes to improve the state's WorkForce Center system of 48 one-stop centers providing job search services, career planning, and skills training. Among recommendations in the report:

—Provide better alignment, increased leveraging of resources, broader partnerships and improved communication.

—Invest in infrastructure and technology to support the centers.

—Improve responsiveness to business.

—Consider a single unified brand for the centers to provide a common understanding of the system and better serve jobseekers and businesses.

Other states with good results attacking the skills gap— Asked to identify exemplary states that are worthwhile to emulate in building strong work forces and attacking the skills gap, Homer made note of Georgia, for its Quick Start program that has provided training to support companies in

biomedical and manufacturing; Connecticut, for a joint state-federal grants to support job training programs, and Virginia, with \$900,000 in grants to help close skills gaps in industries that are key to the commonwealth.

ATD members deliver, design, and/or provide the training—Asked how employer-members of ATD carry out their training, Homer replied that members themselves are conducting the training within organizations or on behalf of client organizations/businesses. Thus, the training is carried out by people who are themselves working in the same areas. The key objective in training, she said, is how it connects to the objectives of the organization, and what the organization is trying to improve or affect in areas such as customer service, productivity, sales, and bottom line, among others. Professional and trade associations usually are industry-specific and may provide training or professional development to individuals working in that occupation.

A significant trend in business today is informal training, not necessarily in a classroom, but peer-to-peer coaching as one example. Increasingly, organizations are using technology to deliver learning and sometimes the learning content may be delivered on a tablet or another mobile device.

Continuing the discussion of the ATD role in employee training, Homer agreed with a questioner that ATD is an organization that does more training of trainers than training of employees in specific organizations. In other words, ATD is a membership association that provides professional development for trainers.

Where employer training is concentrated, among employees with varied tenure in the company— The ATD 2015 skills gap survey did not identify whether people are inexperienced or experienced in a given field. The survey asked about existing skills gaps and employee length of tenure. Respondents to the 2015 skills gap survey noted that in their organizations, employees with less tenure in the company (0-5 years) had more pronounced skills gaps than employees with longer tenure.

What's behind the urgent need for skills training today?— Responding to that question, Homer cited pace of change in the nature of jobs, competition among firms, dealing with economic factors, mergers and acquisitions, and the growing number of baby boomers retiring and the need for skilled, knowledgeable professionals to take their place.

Is there too much talk and too little decision-making?— A questioner was involved in several one-hour business conference calls this week with different businesses. It was obvious in each session, the questioner said, that people were doing their best to talk around the problems and avoid making decisions. There seems to be a lack of willingness—or ability—to assume leadership. Homer replied that in any collaborative approach, expectations, accountability, and ownership should be clear.

U. S. Chamber report recommending employers be more assertive with educational institutions is "spot on"— Homer noted that a recommendation in a recent U. S. Chamber of Commerce report, urging businesses to involve themselves directly in the design of curriculum at educational institutions, would help organizations ensure there is a pipeline of future workers with the

skills and knowledge the business needs. The report recommends businesses identify educational institutions to which they will give preference in hiring, if those institutions demonstrate a commitment to directing their education and training to employer needs.

Won't skills gap close if employers offer higher salaries?— A questioner asked whether increasing compensation would have the effect of automatically reducing the skills problem because qualified persons would seek out jobs that pay more. Homer replied that ATD does not collect data on wages/salaries related to skills gaps. Compensation and skills can be very specific to a given job.

Multitudes of training approaches available —A questioner noted that ATD is only one of several entities that concentrate on improving the training of employees. Yes, Homer replied, there are many approaches to training.

Why train if the employees will just end up going elsewhere?— This question produced dialogue between Homer and the group about the disappearance of long-time employees in many firms today. Homer noted that there are several generations in the workforce today, including a growing majority of workers in the Millennial generation and a still-significant percentage in the Baby Boomer generation who are poised to retire. She noted that many organizations don't approach training from the perspective of 'what if we train them and they leave?' The key is to ensure workers have the skills and knowledge the organization needs to perform and be successful in measures that are meaningful to the business. Firms seem more inclined to let go of valuable employees in economy measures, one person suggested. Another said that individual employees don't have the same sense of loyalty that many had in years past.