March Talent Talk Features Future of Work Panel, Industry and Education Opportunities

By Emily Younger Barnwell

The Partnership's continuous efforts to align regional workforce needs with area education and training programs took a pivotal step forward on March 7.

The Talent Team hosted its first Talent Talk of 2024 at the Cargill Protein Headquarters in downtown Wichita.

Partnership President Jeff Fluhr, Cargill Vice President and Chief Legal Counsel Mark Quayle and Wichita Mayor Lily Wu welcomed a diverse assembly of about 85 participants to the event. They encouraged the audience to immerse themselves in the future of work discussion, emphasizing the importance of ensuring young people are engaging with businesses throughout their educational experience.

"Talent attraction and retention are critical to our region's continued and future economic success," said Fluhr. "I urge each of you to actively engage in today's timely conversation and listen to the many different voices in the room so that we can continue to move the needle forward."

As Fluhr introduced Quayle, he emphasized Cargill's integral role in shaping Wichita's dynamic workforce and contributing to the vibrancy of the downtown area. Quayle shed light on Cargill's strategic decision to maintain its headquarters in Wichita in 2018, pointing to the city's robust talent pipeline.

"With more than 800 employees in Wichita, talent was a key factor," explained Quayle. "Our downtown headquarters was created with top-tier amenities and spaces for meaningful collaboration to not only attract new employees but retain our current workforce."

Cargill Vice President and Chief Legal Counsel Mark Quayle welcomed Talent Talk attendees to Cargill Protein's downtown headquarters.

Wichita Mayor Lily Wu gave a special welcome and encouraged the group to share why they chose Wichita.

Having grown up in Wichita, Mayor Wu described her educational experience within Wichita Public Schools and Wichita State University. She called on the individuals in attendance to work together to create a culture where young people feel valued.

"I am a person who has chosen Wichita. It is the best place to live, work and raise a family," Mayor Wu said. "I will continue to share my story of coming to America and being a product of Wichita Public Schools. I encourage each of you to share why you chose Wichita so that together, we can continue to grow our city."

Tami Bradley, senior strategic advisor of talent and workforce development for the Partnership, explained the 2024 Talent Talks are the direct results of the Partnership's advanced manufacturing, healthcare and technology workshops in 2023.

"Today, we are taking the next step, outlined in the workshop output summaries by Deloitte, to continue the vital industry and education conversations we began last year," explained Bradley.

Future of Work Panel

Bradley's introduction led seamlessly into the future of work panel facilitated by Ricki Ellison, director of talent, workforce development and community engagement at the Partnership.

The panel featured students from USD 259's Manufacturing and Healthcare Future Ready Centers, a representative from a regional apprenticeship program and young professionals from area businesses. Panelists included:

- Grace Coyne, TESSERE, Marketing Coordinator
- Marissa, Healthcare Future Ready Center, WPS Student
- Damian, Manufacturing Future Ready Center, WPS Student
- Bethzy, Healthcare Future Ready Center, WPS Student
- Rylan, Healthcare Future Ready Center, WPS Student
- Rachel White, Evergy, Senior Mgr. Workforce Pipeline Development
- Sage Williams, Empowered, Business Intelligence Lead

Ricki Ellison of the Greater Wichita Partnership, led the Future of Work Panel.

Panelists explained their entries into specific career paths, providing insights into their educational and professional journeys before answering a series of questions posed by the audience. Below are key takeaways from the panel.

- Internships and apprenticeships must include on-the-job training, options for further professional and skill development and flexibility for students to decide if the career aligns with their aspirations.
- There must be clear and effective communication about career opportunities. These opportunities should be introduced and discussed with students as early as middle school and with their parents.
- There should be an emphasis on building intentional relationships, providing mentorship and creating sustainable partnerships to address inclusion and communication gaps.

Keith Lawing, executive director of the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, closed the program. He challenged business leaders in the room to step into internships and other workforce development opportunities.

"Let's take talent talk to talent action. We need more employers to engage with our students. Help us create more internships, help us develop talent and help us grow the Wichita community," Lawing emphasized.

Talent Talks are a key initiative of the Partnership's Talent Roadmap. The event was presented by the Partnership, Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas and Cargill.

The Workforce Alliance is working with area school districts and organizations to coordinate summer internships for high school students. Click here to learn more and get involved with the Youth Employment Project.