

Panelists encourage better training for job applicants

Wednesday's event at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center was part of the ongoing Cox Business Executive Discussion Series.

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As human resources director for a medium-sized company of 200 employees in Roanoke, Kathy Claytor sometimes sees a mismatch between what her company needs and the skill sets and expectations that job applicants have, even in a time of high unemployment.

Claytor, with Delta Dental of Virginia, told fellow audience members at a discussion on hiring trends Wednesday that she's had a tough time filling some jobs because of that mismatch. She said later it's particularly an issue with information technology jobs requiring applicants who also have strong communications skills, and in filling customer service jobs.

Her comment and question to five experts from the technology, construction, government, academic and health care fields was part of a broad-ranging, 90-minute forum on where and how the Roanoke and New River region will grow as the national economic recovery gains momentum. The event, part of the ongoing Cox Business Executive Discussion Series, was co-sponsored by The Roanoke Times.

There were the usual calls for more regional cooperation and less parochialism and some sobering macroeconomic data from a Radford University economist about the uphill climb the nation faces before the economy expands. But panelists and some in the audience of about 90 people at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center got into an interactive discussion of the need to let younger people know the types of skills they'll need to

compete in a global economy.

Panelist Mary Guy Miller, president of Blacksburg-based IDD Inc., an information technology company, said she wants to see middle school students focused on math and science and eager to find a field using those disciplines that engages them.

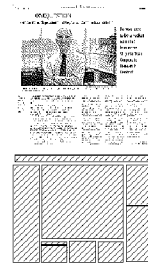
Audience member Jonathan Hagmaier, chief executive officer of Interactive Achievement, an educational software company in Roanoke, called on fellow members of the business community to educate the next generation about the jobs that are out there and the skills they'll need by offering internships.

Panelist Sumati Srinivas, an associate professor of economics at Radford University, cited U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data that indicate the health care and technology sectors show potential for future growth, particularly home health aides in the former and software engineers in the latter.

Srinivas said a unique feature of the now-ended recession and the slow-developing recovery has been persistent, long-term unemployment, with nearly half of the unemployed nationally having been out of work for 27 weeks or longer. She suggested the business community and educators talk to the unemployed and see what skills they need that will help them find jobs.

Panelist Stan Breakell, chairman and CEO of commercial construction firm Breakell Inc., said as the region emerges from the economic downturn, now is the time for business owners to focus on innovation. "Be creative," Breakell said. "You've got to out-innovate other countries," he continued, referencing President Obama's State of the Union remarks.

One factor working to the region's advantage is a willingness to collaborate in the cause of economic development, said panelist Doug Chittum, Roanoke County's economic development director.



“We have to all work together and I think we do as a valley,” he said.

Several panelists mentioned the new Virginia Tech-Carilion Medical School and Research Institute as a bright spot for job growth in the future, particularly as the VTC Research Institute generates hoped-for private-sector spinoffs. Panelist Nathaniel Bishop, president of Carilion Clinic’s Jefferson College of Health Sciences, said he thinks that growth will mirror what’s happened at the Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center in Blacksburg over the past 25 years.

“My personal belief is that the technology sector will be a driving force for growth going forward,” said Miller, who pointed to a new jobs board sponsored by the NewVa Corridor Technology Council, jobs.thetechnologycouncil.com.

Breakell cited a Roanoke Valley Governor’s School science fair as a great place for business people to meet up-and-coming students who might make good interns and later innovative employees.

Said Breakell, “These are the folks you’d like to come back.”



STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS | The Roanoke Times

Panelist Mary Guy Miller, president of Blacksburg-based IDD Inc., an information technology company, discusses job growth ideas during the Cox Business Executive Discussion Wednesday in Roanoke. Jefferson College of Health Sciences President Nathaniel Bishop, shown at right, was also a panelist.

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The next Cox Business Executive Discussion will be held April 26 at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center. The topic will be the role of entrepreneurship in the economic recovery.

For information on upcoming and past forums:
www.roanoke.com/business/eds/