



Kanawha businesses face recruiting challenges

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By Whitney Burdette - email

West Virginia has a small minority population, and that could be one reason why the state's businesses, particularly those in the Charleston area, don't see much diversity in the work force.

But the Charleston Area Alliance is attempting to change that.

Through a new initiative, Inclusion=Innovation, the alliance is working to change misconceptions about the state to draw in a more diverse work force. However, they face a "chicken and egg" problem.

Jeff James of Mythology Marketing said it's hard for the area to attract minority populations because it doesn't have the right infrastructure.

"We have a bit of a chicken and egg problem," James said. "We don't have the diversity, we don't have the infrastructure, so we can't grow it. It's kind of a circular pattern."

Mythology Marketing works with the Charleston Area Alliance on the Inclusion=Innovation initiative through the MAGNET Project. As part of the project, Mythology conducted research among minority professionals both inside and outside the Kanawha Valley, as well as majority business professionals and recruiters. Mythology presented its findings to the alliance at a meeting Dec. 19. Mythology's research highlighted just a few of the issues Kanawha Valley businesses face in recruiting minority professionals.

"There is a significant lack of minority business infrastructure assets, if you will," James said. "Social, personal care — in other words, the majority community, the white community, does not understand or see these things. Those aren't the hair care places we might go, the fashion boutiques we might go. We just don't think about it or realize things are missing. But when you talk to professionals in different categories, it's one of the top things we hear. We lack the stores, we lack the hair care businesses."

Although the Kanawha Valley is more culturally diverse than most parts of West Virginia, James said many people outside of the Mountain State don't realize that. When asked, they had no idea of Charleston's image. On top of that, Mythology noted a perceived level of apathy among business leaders. According to the survey, about 52 percent of respondents said they have neutral feelings about recruiting minorities. Not only do these issues affect the recruitment of minority professionals, but young talent in general.

"One interesting connection here is the issues we're facing in the region from a diversity perspective are in many ways similar to the same issue we're facing in recruiting young talent in general," James said. "We've heard a lot from Generation Charleston. The issues of young talent have been elevated much higher in our state. There have been some things that have been done that are very positive. But the issue of housing, job opportunities, amenities, are almost like a reflection of what we've heard from diverse professionals. They're very similar."

According to Mythology's research, 44 percent of Kanawha Valley business owners said attracting minority talent is "somewhat challenging."

But not all hope is lost, James said. Understanding the area's assets and building on them can help the area make progress in recruiting minority professionals. Many business leaders say recruiting minorities is a top priority.

"This is encouraging," he said. "These are people who have tuned in to the business impact of diversity. Diversity equals better results."

Ned Rugeley is a recruiter for Spilman, Thomas and Battle in Charleston. He said Mythology's research backs up what he hears from the law students he attempts to recruit.

Spilman makes it a point to recruit minorities to its offices. Rugeley said that's partly because large corporations, which tend to have diverse work forces, want to see that reflected in the law firm that represents their interests.

"One of the things I did was to expand the areas in which we recruit," he said.

Rugeley travels to 10 law schools in five states and attends three job fairs per year aimed specifically at minority students. This not only gives Rugeley the opportunity to meet with and potentially recruit diverse professionals, but it also gives him an opportunity to change some perceptions about West Virginia.

"It's not that we have a negative image among the people we interview. It's the fact that we have no image," Rugeley said. "It's the fact that people don't know West Virginia is even a state. I can't tell you how many times I've gotten the question, 'Charleston. Is that close to Richmond?' And these are people who have gone to law school. You would think they would have more cognizance about what's going on. We see ourselves as part of the mid-east region. We're close to DC, we're close to Pittsburgh, we're close to these other places. But we seem to be invisible from the perspective of those other places."

He said that perception isn't necessarily a problem because it gives him an opportunity to change their perceptions.

But minorities in the workplace also can change the perception of their employers. John Gianola of Ernst & Young gave a good example of an employee from China. On a snowy day, Gianola asked the employee if the government canceled school because of snow in his province in China. The employee laughed and told him they start school early and give the students shovels so they can clear the sidewalks on their way to school. It's that kind of perspective, Gianola said, that makes having a diverse work force worthwhile.

"What occurred to me is that the perspective he brings to my team is totally different than the folks who have grown up and gone to an Ivy League school," Gianola said. "He's had experiences that bring different perspectives."

Ernst & Young has worked for years to increase the diversity in its work force. However, Gianola noted it's hard to get other businesses to join in that effort.

"We still have difficulty," he said. "It's not so much in attracting individual candidates. Here's where the difficulty is. The difficulty is in attracting other businesses to join us in this initiative."