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Georgia's Chambers of Commerce Are Developing Talent They Can't Keep

Workforce development has been a priority for chambers of commerce across Georgia, with a strong focus on helping businesses overcome one of the greatest challenges facing its economy: attracting and retaining talented professionals. Ironically, this challenge is no longer limited to the businesses chambers serve; chambers across Georgia are facing the very same struggle within their own organizations[1].

Data shows that Georgia's economy continues to grow, maintaining a low unemployment rate of approximately 3.5% while reaching record highs in labor force participation and employment[1]. While these indicators signify a strong and promising economy, they have also intensified competition for talent, making it increasingly difficult for employers, including chambers of commerce, to attract and retain skilled professionals.

Most people envision their local chamber as a nonprofit organization that promotes community engagement through ribbon cuttings, networking events, and business celebrations. In reality, today’s chamber plays a significant role within our communities. It serves as an economic development partner, advocates for small businesses, strengthens the local workforce, promotes local and regional tourism, develops community leaders, and often becomes the first strategic partner businesses turn to when considering expansion[2/3].

Yet many people would be surprised to learn just how lean these organizations operate.

The average local chamber serves hundreds of member businesses with only a handful of employees and a modest operating budget[2/3]. Those small teams are expected to organize dozens of events each year, advocate public policy, recruit new members, retain existing ones, support economic development initiatives, communicate with stakeholders, and serve as the face of the local business community. ACCE's national benchmarking data consistently shows that chambers accomplish an extraordinary amount with remarkably small staff[4].

Chamber professionals spend their days working directly with business leaders, building relationships while demonstrating leadership, strategic thinking, effective communication, and project management. In many ways, they are participating in an ongoing interview with the private sector, where their talents are readily visible to prospective employers.

When our professionals excel, local businesses notice and hire them.

It is difficult to fault either side. Businesses are searching for qualified professionals, while chamber employees naturally pursue opportunities for career advancement. However, limited funding often prevents chambers from competing with private-sector compensation. In many

cases, the skills employees develop through chamber work lead them to opportunities within the business community they have helped strengthen.

This results in frequent turnover and institutional knowledge walking out the door, leading executive leaders to spend valuable time recruiting and training instead of focusing on economic development and member engagement.

For too long, many chambers have accepted the belief that, because they are nonprofit organizations, they must operate with a nonprofit mindset. That assumption is a mistake. Chambers exist to serve businesses, and they should be managed with the same financial discipline, strategic planning, and talent investment expected of any successful private sector organization. If we expect our organizations to deliver measurable economic results, advocate effectively for business, and attract exceptional leaders, we cannot continue operating under the assumption that low salaries and limited professional growth are simply the cost of doing business.

That starts with budgets. Inflation has increased expense over the past several years, yet many chambers have been reluctant to increase membership investments or diversify revenue enough to keep pace. While the average chamber membership costs a few hundred dollars a year—roughly $300 to $400 for a typical business, depending on the community and membership level—many chambers have hesitated to adjust dues even as the value they provide has expanded dramatically. The result is predictable: organizations ask employees to perform at increasingly higher levels while paying salaries that fall further behind the private sector. Chambers should not apologize for charging what it takes to build sustainable organizations. Members don't benefit from intentionally low dues if the consequence is constant turnover among the very professionals responsible for delivering value. Stronger budgets aren't about growing bureaucracy; Investing in experienced professionals allow chambers to provide consistent value to members, preserve institutional knowledge through employee retention, and continue advancing local economic development.

After experiencing this reality firsthand, I decided that simply hoping employees would stay wasn't a strategy.

Instead, I made the decision to compensate key leadership positions at levels that are competitive with the private sector. Those positions carry institutional knowledge, strategic relationships, and long-term responsibilities that are essential to the organization's success. Investing in those employees is an investment in the chamber's ability to serve its members consistently and effectively.

At the same time, I've accepted that certain positions, such as event coordinators, communications professionals, and administrative staff, will naturally experience more turnover.

Rather than viewing that as failure, we've embraced it as part of our mission.

For many young professionals, a chamber can provide one of the best first professional experiences available. They learn customer service, event management, communications,

marketing, public speaking, relationship building, and leadership. They work directly with CEOs, elected officials, entrepreneurs, and community leaders, experiences few entry-level jobs can offer while providing skill development opportunities.

If those employees eventually leave for better opportunities with one of our member businesses, that isn't necessarily a loss. In many ways, it's success.

Our members gain a talented employee who already understands the local business community, and a young professional takes the next step in building a meaningful career. That's a win for the individual, the employer, and ultimately our community.

The real challenge is ensuring chambers retain enough experienced leadership to continue developing that next generation of talent.

Georgia has built one of the strongest business economies in America. Maintaining that reputation requires strong local chambers that can recruit, develop, and retain outstanding professionals while continuing to drive economic growth.

Perhaps the question isn't why chambers lose good employees.

Perhaps it's whether we can invest in the value they create before they're recruited by someone else.

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