

Transcript- Talk CNY: Season 1, Episode 3

Andrew Fish 0:06

CenterState CEO is Central New York's leading business leadership and economic development organization committed to creating a region where businesses thrive and all people prosper. Welcome to CenterState CEO's semimonthly podcast Talk CNY presented by NBT Bank.

Kate Hammer 0:21

Through this series CenterState CEO shares the latest news and information on topics ranging from community and workforce development to policy and innovation. You'll get an inside look at the people projects and planning moving Central New York forward. Take a moment right now to subscribe in your listening app for new episode reminders every other Wednesday.

Dominic Robinson 0:45

Right now we're hearing from Central New York companies, that they are poised for unprecedented growth. The challenge that most of them face to achieving their growth potential is talent. What's really ironic about that is that we have so much talent in our community that is hidden and untapped. People waiting for opportunities, who want to be part of our community's growth, who want to build wealth, and have access to opportunity. And so the real challenge for us is to marry those two things together.

Andrew Fish 1:11

Today, Dominic Robinson, CenterState, CEO, Senior Vice President of inclusive growth, and Amy Durfee, Vice President of Workforce Innovation at CenterState CEO join us to talk about hidden talent in our community and efforts CenterState CEO is leading to connect those individuals to opportunities. I'm Andrew Fish, Senior Vice President of Member and Business Experience at CenterState CEO. I

Kate Hammer 1:33

I'm Kate, business coach and member at CenterState CEO. We are your hosts for Talk CNY. Amy, thank you so much for being here today.

Aimee Durfee 1:41

Thank you for having us.

Kate Hammer 1:43

All right, well, let's get this thing kicked off. Why is equity part of our workforce strategy?

Aimee Durfee 1:48

Well, as Dom was saying, We've got so many opportunities here for people and equity is a way to increase access for people who already have talent, who already have skills, but who might not have access to information about jobs, they might not know how to get trained for those jobs. We want to be able to bring more diverse talent into these incredible work opportunities and career opportunities in

tech and construction and advanced manufacturing, making semiconductor chips. In order for everyone to benefit from all of this growth that's happening here, we have to have equity as a foundational principle for what we're doing.

Dominic Robinson 2:29

And I think the thing about it is, is that there's a lot of research that shows that diverse teams are more productive, more effective. But the reality is, is that not all populations, not all people have the same access. So, you know, for us equity is about opening up access to everyone who lives here in Central New York and giving them the opportunity to be part of that growth.

Andrew Fish 2:48

That's fantastic. And obviously super important, and especially at a time where the labor market seems to be so constricted, and there's such low unemployment rates. But what we know is there's a lot of right opportunities for people who are not maybe in those statistics. And so I think we use a phrase around here hidden talent is that, so you want to tell us a little bit about what that means and why that's a key part of our strategy?

Dominic Robinson 3:11

Well, I think hidden talent is, you know, literally folks that are capable of doing jobs that are, you know, posted and on the market here in Central New York, but who aren't showing up in those unemployment statistics, right. So we look at our unemployment rate and think it's very low. And technically it is. But what that doesn't account for is the roughly 40% of the folks in our region who are underemployed, who are working what amount to really difficult jobs that often require government subsidies that are very difficult for them to make ends meet. And these are people with a ton of talent, obviously great work ethic, many times working multiple jobs, who could take those experiences and skills and transfer them over to be successful in a career that has more growth potential. At the same time. There are a lot of people who are not working and not showing up on our unemployment, people who dropped out of the labor force. We've seen an example of this over the past couple of years, during the pandemic. And since the pandemic with women, a lot of the workforce participation numbers don't reflect the fact that women have dropped out of the workforce since the pandemic because they are the big been the primary caregivers in their families, in times where a lot of the resources that they typically relied on to be able to go to work were no longer there, right? So, the question is, how do we take a very focused approach to certain populations, and help them step out of the kind of, you know, vicious cycle that they're in and access, an opportunity that will give them a better quality of life and give employers the talent they need?

Andrew Fish 4:37

I mean, problems sound really complex, right? I mean, there's just so many different layers to it in terms of, you know, even even those that are underemployed versus those that have stepped away from the markets, the needs that they have are different. How do you tackle something that has that many facets? How do you approach this kind of a problem as a community?

Aimee Durfee 4:54

Oh, it's one of the things that we've learned from talking to people who are in that situation who are trying to make that switch is that we need to be able to pay people for their time, while they're in training, they need to be able to know there's actually a destination at the end of this process, right that if they take that risk, to make a change in their lives, that it will actually lead somewhere. Because it's a big shift- people making changes that affect their home that affect their family and affect their own perception of who they are and what they're going to be doing as a career. That's a big giant change. So we have to develop ways for people to be able to go through that process and prepare for that transition. It's also about transportation, and childcare and making sure that those systems are accessible for people and flexible for people that we have childcare that's open at the same time that shifts start number four shift starts, we will drive up their kids, and then get to work. We know that if those things start to align, if employers and childcare centers start to align more evenly, that employers will potentially have access to a whole new talent pool, they start their shift times and different times. So there's just there's layers that happen on the employer side, there are also training providers, making trainings that are shorter, faster, paid contextualized in the community, those are all the changes that we're trying to make in the system.

Dominic Robinson 6:19

I think when people think about workforce development, they think of it as training. And that's a part of it, right? But you use the word complex, you hear about all the things that Amy just mentioned, it's really accounting for all these variables and taking a holistic approach.

Andrew Fish 6:31

You know, and it's amazing just to personalize it, I think about the challenges that my partner and I face, we both have salaried professional jobs where we have a lot of flexibility. And the timing associated with childcare and its options is still complicated and difficult, right. And so I just take that moment and think about if that weren't my situation, and my ability to be employed, or to find another opportunity was dependent upon certain times where I needed to be there. What a barrier that is, but what a challenge that has to be.

Dominic Robinson 6:59

Yeah, we need to be wrapped up in about 28 minutes, so I can get my kids. Yeah.

Dominic Robinson 7:02

All right. Let's make sure that we do that!

Kate Hammer 7:06

That is an actual fact. Can you talk a little bit about the difference between what is happening right here in CenterState to make this work? And then what is happening on a larger scale in the community?

Dominic Robinson 7:18

We could tag team this one. But, you know, I think that what we have gotten really comfortable asserting is that we don't do training. We don't do service provision, right? There are nonprofits, there, to your colleges and workforce organizations that do that work. Our job is first and foremost to, you know, leverage the relationships we have with our business leaders to understand their needs, and to understand them in ways that allow us to really meet company owners where they are to meet business leaders where they are, and then to develop workforce solutions that sometimes challenge them to think and do things differently. But also, we're rallying our training partners and our community partners to align their services and their resources with the needs of the employers, right. So we're kind of taking a dual approach where we're really engaging employers working with them, getting them to rethink stuff, and then our partners too. And so we're kind of facilitating solutions, and thinking about all the different variables that need to be addressed to make something a reality, as opposed to just developing and executing a training program. When you know, that's obviously something that others in the community can do better than we can.

Aimee Durfee 8:28

So we are supporting the mayor's Syracuse Build Initiative and Syracuse Surge Initiative. And what that means is that we are incubating trainings, putting trainings together, putting all of the supportive services together, related to getting more women and people of color into construction careers, into advanced manufacturing careers, and into software career. So many, many partners that we work with to make that happen. But part of our work is also to introduce best practices. And so an experiment a little bit and sort of see well can we can we do this? Can we do a training that is shorter, and it's picking people out of the community? For example, we've got employers coming to us saying we need more electrical maintenance techs, and people will take care of the equipment in manufacturing facilities. But we don't we don't want to just replicate a two year program. We wanted to say can we do this faster. So finding people who already had experience people who worked on farm equipment or motorcycles or already had mechanical experience, bringing them into the program, doing a shorter program, and then working with employers to continue training people after they get on the job, as opposed to starting people who with people who have maybe no experience who might need a much longer runway, but that's the untapped talent. So that's a lot of the work that we do is identifying, reaching out and finding those skills that people have opposite they could be, they may have used in a previous job, but they could be using in a job that's paying them a lot.

Dominic Robinson 10:08

It really requires us in that regard to work with an asset minded, you know, a mentality, we're really thinking about, you know, you hear people complain, like, oh, there's nobody out there with skills or there's your skills gap where no one wants to work. And you know, you're like, actually, no, people are hungry for work, they just can't get out of their current situation, people have skills, they're just not formalized. And they're just not certified the way you need them to be. So how do we actually go out and mine for all that goodness, and unlock it and kind of dispel those narratives.

Aimee Durfee 10:36

We've had one employer in particular, who has worked with us on a manufacturing program, who actually agreed to not always use high school diploma as a prerequisite for their hiring. But instead of that they were able to use people coming through and successfully completing this program, because you're really looking at what skills did people have? Not necessarily? Did they complete high school or not?

Andrew Fish 11:04

That's fascinating. And, I mean, it also sounds like there's a lot of collaborations, right, a lot of partnerships. I mean, what you're describing is just really understanding the landscape and facilitating those solutions, right? Is that our approach to that?

Aimee Durfee 11:20

Yeah. So another example is within Syracuse, build the pathways to apprenticeship program, which is preparing primarily women and people of color to enter the union construction trades, I think we've got about 10, or 12 different partners that are working on the program side, in addition to about 10, or 12, union partners, putting all of this together, from financial coaching, to math, tutoring, to field trips, to see the union apprenticeship sites, to getting people access to cars, all the things that it takes to get paying people's union dues for the first couple of months buying tools and boots, all the things that you need to just be able to launch into that career. It's not insignificant. Yeah. And so all of those partnerships are essential. And it's not easy to maintain them and keep them going and keep everyone going on the same page. But once we get into a rhythm, it starts to work. And it just, it's amazing, what's what's possible.

Dominic Robinson 12:19

And to the job seeker who's sitting in the training, they don't necessarily even know or experienced that it's 10 different agencies coming in to work with them, right? They're just kind of going through the process. And okay, now it's time to think about transportation. Now it's time to, you know, consider my financial health and maybe open up a savings account or do some credit repair, but that's just kind of all part of what they're getting through the program. And so but on their own, they'd have to do that all it's so disaggregated. Right. And I think that what, what I will say is that there's no one organization that can provide all the resources that are necessary to really address the systemic issues that a lot of people face when they're looking for work. But what it's necessary, then is that kind of intermediary that often we serve us, but it doesn't have to be us, right. It's just having someone who's looking at the full picture and bringing together all the different resources and making sure that they're working in unison. That is the secret sauce. And that's something that I've been really proud of our team in terms of how we've done that over the years.

Andrew Fish 13:14

So super exciting stuff. And I know that there's a little bit more than I want to get to, but we're going to take a quick break. We'll be right back with the final word from our guests. But first, here's a note from Talk CNY's presenting sponsor, NBT Bank.

NBT Bank Sponsor 13:27

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Kate Hammer 13:57

Continuing our conversation- As we look to the future needs in this community, what do we have to do together to ensure we are ready for the future?

Dominic Robinson 14:06

I think that it's hard to overstate just how different things are going to be, with Micron come into Syracuse bringing 9,000 jobs over 20 years adding an additional 40,000 jobs. It's you know, it's a challenge that unlike any we've ever faced before, right, we already have employers struggling to find workers. And the interesting thing about it is is that we have great educational partners who are going to be able to design and deliver programs that meet microns needs that meet the needs of their supply chain partners that meet the needs of the additional professional service providers that need to, you know, stand up shops around the town. But the fact of the matter is, is that especially in fields like tech in advanced manufacturing, we already have a pipeline issue getting into those programs. We have empty seats in classrooms. We have advanced manufacturing programs engineering programs that are predominantly white and male All in half empty classrooms. So our real challenge is not necessarily how do we train people for the future is how do we develop a pipeline of people who have the baseline skills that are necessary to go and access those trainings and who have the conditions in their lives that allow them to pursue them without getting hung up with all the barriers that come with living at the margins of the economy, right? So that's really where Amy and I are focused. Our day to day is thinking about the system below the system, right is how do we develop infrastructure that unlocks talent and brings them to that level where they can get trained and go do those jobs?

Aimee Durfee 15:35

And also just learning more having people understand what, like, what is a semi conductor? What is that? Right? What Micron does is make chips that go into devices that store memory? Right? So these are things that are in your phones that are in all kinds of devices? Yeah. And so the work to be done in this facility is going to be mostly manufacturing high volume manufacturing of these chips. So that's part of what we want to do is educate people, what does that even mean? What would your day to day world look like if your aim is get people behind the walls of the have the facility to understand like, what are the careers because you don't you think about construction, people kind of know what that is, because you can see it, you may have participated in it, right? But this is a whole new world when we're talking about manufacturing high tech products, it's this very specialized set of skills. And something that people don't necessarily know what that is, if no one in your family or immediate surroundings has been connected to that industry. So we've got a long ways to go to educate people in real accessible, culturally

responsive ways to understand what would you be doing in this career? And what are the your opportunities if you entered the semiconductor industry? What are the opportunities for you to advance and making those real for people and making them and providing very clear steps and milestones for people to get onto that path? So they're not feeling? Oh, that's for somebody else? That's not really for me, I love that, yes, there's a mental model shift to be able to say, No, that is for me, I can do that.

Dominic Robinson 17:19

And if you think about the the kind of prevailing legacy around like manufacturing in our community, right, it was the lifeblood of our economy for a long time, it provided a middle class living to a very diverse workforce. And then it collapsed. And the manufacturing jobs that have remained have largely been hidden in kind of little industrial pockets in our communities. So they're not even visible. And the people that are doing them are mostly white men. And as a white man, I'm not anti white men. But I think that we also know that we all gravitate to the things that we're familiar with, right. And so if you don't have someone in your family working in manufacturing, then you have no concept of what it is. And so there's a little bit of a stigma, I think that manufacturing has taken on, right, it's become almost a part of our Rust Belt narrative, right? And so the question now is, we're bringing manufacturing back, but in ways that are radically different than it's ever been, you know, before, this is a really incredible opportunity. That's, that's something that is real, you know, and it's, I think, interesting, because a lot of people get excited about tech, right. And we don't really have a whole lot of trouble recruiting for programs that we're developing and sponsoring in the software space. For some reason. That's, that's sexy. That's exciting right here. But this is also tech. It's the hardware side, right? So we got to make hardware sexy, right? Like that's, that's like part of the that's part of the challenge in front of us. But I think that when you when you really think about what the technological application of this is that it's mind blowing, and it's exciting, and it's interesting, and I think that that's the thing that we have to get people to start to better understand.

Andrew Fish 18:58

Amazing to have both of you on. Impressive work. I know I get to watch it from next to you, and sometimes in the trenches with you on this stuff. And we have a lot of work ahead of us we know but really, really grateful to have the two of you as part of the team here at CenterState and helping make change in this community the way that we're headed. Thank you guys very much.

Aimee Durfee 19:16

Thank you.

Dominic Robinson 19:17

Thank you.

Andrew Fish 19:17

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Kate Hammer 19:43

Join us in March as we explore the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion and creating better workplaces and communities for all. For new episode reminders every other Wednesday be sure to subscribe and your favorite podcast listening app. If you're enjoying Talk CNY, consider leaving a quick review or five star rating.