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Panel: Millennial professionals want trains, trails and fast-track careers

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Today's young professionals – so-called millennials – seek a clear path to career growth, recreational opportunities and above all, plenty of public transportation when deciding where they want to live and work.

That was the consensus of a panel of young adults who spoke frankly to business professionals attending the Future Wisconsin Economic Summit Wednesday in downtown Milwaukee. The event, sponsored by Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, discussed Wisconsin's business future in 20 years – including how to attract a new generation of workers to fill increasingly high-tech jobs, as well as skilled trade positions left vacant by retirees.

Comprising the panel were Tyler Hackbarth, 23, a Milwaukee School of Engineering grad who now runs his own startup software company called Searium Solutions; Austen Scudder, 29, a UW-Milwaukee grad with a master's degree in mechanical engineering who now works for Rockwell Automation and Shae Kellner, 18, who is among a handful of females enrolled in the welding fabrication and robotics program at Northcentral Technical College in Wausau.

"I really love it," said Kellner of the two-year tech program. "They are really advocating for me to be able to pursue a career in that field, which is a male-dominated one. There are about six of us females out of about 100 students."

Kellner says when she completes her welding training, she will rate potential employers by their stability – "Are they looking to sell out or close sometime soon?"-- and she expects to be able to envision career growth.

"You guys, from my point of view, always like to look at the long-term road," she said, referring to older business professionals. "You're talking 20 years down the road, whereas me and some of my peers, we have shorter terms. Five, 10 years down the road, we want to be here, maybe graduating from college, having a steady job, looking to find a house."

Scudder agreed: "I think we're a very hard-working generation," he said. "That's no different than any other generation in history, but I just think we want to see results much more quickly. You can blame it on technology or blame it on anything you want, but we get excited a lot. We want to see that potential realized much more quickly."

Scudder said young professionals want to feel comfortable at a company – and see a chance to grow there.

“Some of the people who work for Rockwell are my age, and we’ve actually been able to attract people from outside of Wisconsin,” said Scudder, who’s been with the company for three years. “I think they come because they see a good company. They want to see what Wisconsin and Milwaukee have to offer. Family is always a factor, but career growth is very big to consider.”

The panelists mentioned recreation as a plus for Wisconsin’s millennials – mentioning things like snowmobiling and a system of trails for running and bicycling.

When asked by a member of the audience if a proposed new Milwaukee Bucks arena would add appeal, the two young engineers admitted they don’t really follow basketball, but said they see the economic value of the arena.

“I get the tourism factor,” said Hackbarth.

Kellner said professional sports teams provide the “sense of community” that her generation craves.

When asked if they liked the idea of a trolley in Milwaukee, the three expressed strong support for public transportation of all kinds.

“What would be great is if I could take a trolley to get to the game,” said Scudder, adding that public transportation and alternate kinds of accessibility other than driving are “very important” to his generation.

Hackbarth said public transportation enhances millennials’ perception of a city’s affordability and reasonable cost of living. He said Seattle is considered attractive because suburbs are linked to the city by trains and trails.

“I know a lot of people, myself included, who are looking to live someplace where we can take a bike everywhere,” he said.

Scudder said communities could do better at communicating the existence of recreational activities to young adults and that companies could do better to communicate opportunities for advancement and training.

Kellner extended that concept to schools. “I was lucky enough to be encouraged to go into shop classes in my K-12 years,” she said. “There needs to be more encouragement for females and more encouragement from the community as a whole.”

-- *By Kay Nolan*

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