

# BUILDING CAREER PATHWAYS

What CEOs Should Know About Local Job Growth, Hybrid Work Schedules,  
Economic Projections, and Employee Uptraining and Retention

IN CONVERSATION WITH

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Presented by **TRUIST** 

A conversation between *D CEO* and an insightful panel of local experts in various leadership roles about economic, education, financial, and employment issues affecting employers, as well as their current and future employees. They each share valuable perspectives on what forward-thinking business owners and company leaders should know about hiring—and keeping—top talent in the coming years.

### What are some options to effectively reskill, or upskill, a company's employees?

**MAYA THOMAS FERNANDEZ:** At Dallas College, we partner with several employers to help upskill and reskill their current employees. There is also a state initiative right now, The Texas Reskilling & Upskilling through Education (TRUE), which is reskilling and upskilling through education, and Dallas College is working on a few initiatives through that, specifically in healthcare and IT. We work with several local hospitals to bring in the soft skills needed that some employees are missing, but also upskilling and reskilling those employees by letting employees learn on the job.

**LINDA K. JOHNSON:** For Aspire, we are working with a unique segment of the population that oftentimes has no advocates. We are working with

various workers who are living in poverty at minimum wage. Our goal is to focus on programs that have high growth potential and are living wage jobs. We focused our workforce training programs in the last three years in the logistics field, which luckily, we chose right before COVID. And that proved to be brilliant. We kept those programs going, and we are working with people who are moving from minimum wage jobs to jobs that are paying an average of \$18 an hour, which puts them in a living wage category and changes the trajectory for those families.

**LYNN MCBEE:** The City of Dallas has been focused on our citizens who are in generational poverty. You have some with three generations of poverty in households, and you have folks who have never seen anyone in their family work. I believe wholeheartedly that through all the great education with Dallas ISD and Dallas

College, and with the training that companies are doing and how real they are getting about retaining employees and offering on-the-job training and centers, childcare, and healthcare, that if we do not truly invest in these and “walk the walk” with them, that we are not going to be successful. The City of Dallas has been focused on working with nonprofits and big churches in southern Dallas, making sure we are bringing the jobs and the training to make it as easy possible to get that first entry-level job. Can you change behavioral patterns of people who really haven't had anything healthy modeled? We can't blame it on them. But we have got to make sure we are investing in those kinds of workplace skills.

**LINDA K. JOHNSON:** It is important in our training to be able to make very clear the expectations—the minimum expectations—of employers, because oftentimes, they have not been told what they (employees) do not know because they grew up in households that didn't pass it along from parent to child. It is something that is integral in training, especially when we are working with poverty-stricken, marginalized populations—also providing the kinds of support services they need, such as childcare and transportation.

**KIMBERLY MOORE-WRIGHT:** When you have employers that are going to be recipients of these individuals after they have come through those training programs, engage them early on to be a part of the process as you are helping them understand what's to be expected. Once those individuals join those companies, ensure there is appropriate support there for the mentors who are there for them to help with that transition. When that doesn't happen, things fall apart. You need to make sure you have that connectivity and strong partnership while they are in the program, which then transitions to what happens outside of the program.

**ELIZABETH CAUDILL MCCLAIN:** I think it has always been fascinating that we hear about internships—that's something every business understands. “Oh, I get an intern, I'll teach them, they'll shadow, and then they'll go back to school.” But often, we need employers engaged in this upskilling and reskilling training in the same way that you would see in a traditional internship at a college or university. Explaining the expectations, mentoring, shadowing, and ensuring that



Left to right: Elizabeth Caudill McClain; Linda K. Johnson, PhD; Maya Thomas Fernandez, PhD; Kimberly Moore-Wright; Noelle LeVeaux, Publisher, *D Magazine Partners*

the culture is right. So, as we're training folks, they can then be successful in the company.

**MAYA THOMAS FERNANDEZ:** Employers should offer networking opportunities for their employees, like a networking day where employees can learn more about other departments and what opportunities may be coming up for them. It goes hand-in-hand with the training that they are receiving as well.

**KIMBERLY MOORE-WRIGHT:** I think also making that a part of ongoing conversation that you (the employer) have with the teammate, or with the employee, about their career. One thing that we stress quite a bit is having clear conversations with teammates. (I use the word teammate because that's what we call our employees.) It's not just about, "How are you doing today?" but "What do you want your future to be? What is it that you want out of your work over the next three years, five years? Where is it that you want to go?" Then helping them understand that "Here are the skills that need to be built in order to do that, and here's the pathway to be able to acquire those additional skills." It's using tools like LinkedIn Learning, or a tuition assistance program. I think that's a really natural way that you should initiate that conversation, stating, "This is what you want. This is where you want to be, and these are the skills it's going to take to get there." Or "Here's where your gap is, and here is where you can fill those in."

**LINDA K. JOHNSON:** Lifelong learning is about the fact that there are jobs we can't even imagine that will be the jobs of the future. It's valuable for employers to make use of resources they may not realize are in their community, especially with the Dallas Regional Chamber or any local community college that is deeply embedded in this. Work with them and other researchers, often in higher education, who are knowledgeable about the predictions that are coming in the next five, and sometimes 10, years so they can start to prepare their employees for opportunities that are beginning to arise. This is critical because we've all been through transitions already in our lives. But it's nothing like what's coming in the next five to 10 years.

**KIMBERLY MOORE-WRIGHT:** Unfortunately, sometimes when you look at exit interview data surveys, people talk about the reason why they are

leaving, and it's because they felt like there was no opportunity and didn't feel like someone was invested. We have really taken a good look at our leadership training because we think it is essential to have great performance within the organization. What are things that that people need, especially post-pandemic, and operating and leading in a hybrid environment? Throughout the second half of the pandemic, we really started providing some bite-sized variations of that to teammates—and to leaders in particular—in terms of sharing that with them. We have also created a leadership curriculum for aspiring leaders. Those who may not be

in a leadership position today may want to do this in the future. We have different variations of leadership curriculum assigned to those moving into leadership roles as well. This is just as important as the technical skills you are providing. I believe you can have someone who is well-educated and has great technical skills, but if they're not a great leader or don't have great leadership skills, there is still a significant opportunity for them.

**LYNN MCBEE:** It's great that employers are looking at their employees and asking "Where are you on this growth chart?" And "Let me grow with you, work with you, and show you the opportunities." A recent poll says Gen Z's reasons they are going to leave (an employer) is lack of advancement and not feeling connected. It is important for us to stay with folks and give them these extra skills in addition to what they need to do the job. I can't say enough about that. We have learned that we have an 85% fill rate because of these things that people lack that are, to some, quite basic, so meeting people where they are and figuring out their path forward, and giving them that extra training and staying with them.

**LINDA K. JOHNSON:** Part of Aspire's core mission is based around meeting people where they are. We serve a low literate population enrolled

in our GED prep programs, which sad to say in Dallas County, is 20% of the adult population over age 25. More than 350,000 adults in our population don't even have a high school diploma. The curriculum we use is actually created for adults. Under the auspices of the Department of Labor, they actually oversee the informal education, unlike the Department of Education that oversees formal education for Dallas College. Everything in our ESL classes or GED classes addresses the soft skills in the curriculum, as they're learning a language or learning math or language arts to study for that

**"Truist has a lot of partnerships within the communities in which we serve. We are trying to provide opportunities for employment and partnering with other companies and agencies that will help create job pathways for our communities."**

KIMBERLY MOORE-WRIGHT / TRUIST BANK

test. Our workforce training program, which we do with Ready to Work in Dallas, has done an incredible job of bringing people in who are already working in the field, talking to them about how these are the kinds of behaviors you need to engage in. These are the ways that you communicate. You have to remember that a large part of the population in Dallas is one that doesn't have or use email—they've never used it, or they forget their passwords. These things are difficult for them. So, understanding what is required ahead of time and hearing it from people who are already in the field while they are getting training to be able to get a job, is really important. I'm thrilled that we offer our programs for free because we've been generously funded by Communities Foundation of Texas and the group fund. Already this calendar year, we have completed certifications for 465 individuals who have been living in poverty. So all of these issues are crucial in terms of making sure that they understand that when you talk about the word 'culture'—and culture is so important—they don't know what that means. So soft skills have to be embedded in everything.

**ELIZABETH CAUDILL MCCLAIN:** I would also look at it from the employer's side. I have been at the DRC for eight and a half years, and in all those



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years, I have heard “soft skills.” I always follow up by asking, “How do you define that?” And no one can answer it. I think that’s what my challenge would be to employers is to say “You know it. You see it. But how do you define it?” That is the biggest gift we can give our training providers is to tell them how we define it and how we are measuring it through the interview process. Because with just saying “soft skills,” there can be so much unconscious bias that is creating additional barriers for these learners that are thinking that they are doing everything possible to meet the soft skills box check. I would kind of take this conversation and flip it a little, challenging the employers to define what that means. And then work with community partners to teach that and walk the walk in your hiring practices.

### How does the current economic environment impact this reskill and upskill endeavor?

**KIMBERLY MOORE-WRIGHT:** Where possible, we are using the coined phrase, ‘intentional flexibility.’ There isn’t a mandate from the top of the house saying that everyone has to work in the office this many days a week or these are the days of the week that you work. We are really letting it be led by the business, because what may make sense for payroll or within HR may look different from our commercial banking area. We are really letting that be led and driven by the business leader, setting

clear expectations for what that frequency is. And allowing teammates to be a part of that conversation as well. Do we have it perfectly? No, we don’t. But we think that that flexibility does a couple of things. When we are looking at hiring individuals, one of the first things they ask about is what type of flexibility is out there. It honors what employees have done during the past three years. They have been able to, for us, be very productive. They have been able to drive what we needed for the business, and not be in an office five days a week in the traditional setting that we had pre-COVID, so it’s important for us to retain part of that. But also, the ‘intentional’ component of it to is help teammates understand that when you’re here, this is what we want to create from a teammate experience. We have new hires that are coming in, we have people who are early in their career and they want that sponsorship and mentorship, and they want to be able to learn from others. Those are the kinds of things that can happen when we’re together in person, and the one-on-one care conversations can happen when we’re together in person. We are just being much more intentional and vocal about the ‘why’ and what that experience is going to be while you’re here has been a big piece of it, too.

**ELIZABETH CAUDILL MCCLAIN:** We surveyed our members from the very beginning of the pandemic to now just to understand this, because truly every industry is in a completely different place. I think even just last month, there was a

new industry saying they are going to return to the office, when others have been in the office for a number of years. I have a staff member who graduated this past May, and she admittedly said, “This really impacted me. I felt like I couldn’t do job shadowing and internships and other things the way that my older siblings maybe could have done, and I feel further behind.” She is brilliant, but we do have to work with her on that mentorship. I love intentional flexibility. I think that is a beautiful way of talking about it. With the younger generation, it’s about authenticity. Being told that you must be back—this is not going to get Gen Z in the door. I think having a conversation of that intentionality of “Yes, we care about you as a person. However, this is our why, and this is why we’re here.” What is authentic connection? That’s when we are going to see the secret sauce.

**LYNN MCBEE:** There is so much focus on the workforce right now. We are going to need to roll in the same direction, which we are. I look at promising things, like what DISD is doing with early college. Only 20% of kids that graduate from DISD right now are graduating from college after six years. We are going to look at how trade is becoming a much bigger part—having an actual skill. This is the skill you have when you graduate. How are we preparing? There is a lot of work in this area, and we don’t have a choice but to collaborate.

**LINDA K. JOHNSON:** I think one of the things that Dallas also has in place that is critically important is measurement systems, in every facet, and we have to be able to see growth—not just tell stories about people, but to be able to actually see actual growth in terms of people’s ability to have a viable life. There are a lot of people measuring this in many different ways. And that data is the most important thing.

**KIMBERLY MOORE-WRIGHT:** I come back to making it easy for people to navigate these pathways and the systems that are being built. I think sometimes there is a lot of great work being done, but folks don’t know about it, or it’s not easy to be able to navigate those systems. In addition to having the movement and seeing those numbers begin to change, a part of that is the ease of being able to do it. I would hope that success would also look like it easier for individuals who need it, and for them to be able to have that access granted and to move forward.