

# LEVERAGING **EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS** TO MEET **REGIONAL WORKFORCE NEEDS** IN WEST CENTRAL GEORGIA

How **West Georgia Technical College** Is Becoming the Upskilling and Reskilling Partner of Choice for Employers

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Lawanda Barradas, Assistant Manager of Human Resources, Hyundai Transys Georgia Powertrain

Matthew Bell, Manager of Safety, Training, and Analytics, Ground Support Equipment, Delta Airlines

Kelley Bush, Director of Workforce Development and Existing Industry, Troup County Development Authority

Steve Cromer, Vice President of Economic Development, West Georgia Technical College

Julie Post, President, West Georgia Technical College

ABOUT WEST GEORGIA TECHNICAL COLLEGE

West Georgia Technical College, with campuses in Carroll, Coweta, Douglas, Haralson, and Troup counties and class sites in Heard and Meriwether counties, offers more than 120 associate degree, diploma, and technical certificate programs of study. A unit of the Technical College System of Georgia, West Georgia Tech is one of the largest of the state's 22 technical colleges. For more information, please visit [www.westgatech.edu](http://www.westgatech.edu).

ABOUT THE REGIONAL WORKFORCE TRAINING CENTER

The Regional Workforce Training Center (RWTC) at West Georgia Technical College offers on-demand, customized training tailored to meet the specific needs of local industries. Our experienced faculty and staff provide ongoing training and upskilling for workers to ensure businesses remain productive and competitive. Additionally, RWTC delivers professional development at all organizational levels, empowering employees to enhance their performance and skills, thereby increasing their value to their employers.

ABOUT THE BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM

The Business-Higher Education Forum is a national nonprofit network connecting innovative corporate and higher education leaders to identify emerging skills and co-develop pathways that address talent gaps in critical areas. We empower and catalyze collaborations that deliver accelerated, inclusive, and effective solutions across education and work. Business and university leaders join the Forum to drive innovation that meets the changing talent needs of learners, workers, and businesses.



# THE CHALLENGE

West central Georgia has become a burgeoning center for advanced manufacturing and logistics. With facilities for global brands across automotive, agriculture, tech, and biotech industries, the region (which includes Carroll, Coweta, Douglas, Haralson, Heard, Meriwether, and Troup counties) has experienced a 100+ percent surge in job demand for manufacturing engineers, machine operators, and material assembly shift technicians alone.<sup>1</sup> With one job posting for every 61 residents,<sup>2</sup> the area is seeing strong growth coupled with a wide talent-supply gap in these occupations. This rapid growth, combined with the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, creates a unique challenge in sourcing skilled labor in a region where the workforce has varying skill levels.

This case study explores a cross-sector response to upskilling and reskilling talent in the region through West Georgia Technical College's (WGTC) establishment of a Regional Workforce Training Center (RWTC), which has fostered impactful employer partnerships to drive skill acquisition for entry-level talent and incumbent workforces, enhance workforce diversity, and meet the evolving needs of both businesses and the community at large.

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1. Lightcast Analyst, 2022

2. Lightcast Analyst, 2022

# THE SOLUTION

In 2022, the Strada Education Foundation launched their **Employer and Community College Partnership Challenge**. This grant initiative, Strada's first national investment in community colleges, recognizes the important role of community colleges in addressing regional workforce needs, particularly in partnership with business.<sup>3</sup> WGTC has been a trusted workforce partner and a source of talent development and training for employers and industry intermediaries across the west central Georgia region as well as eastern central Alabama. However, workforce training through WGTC was conducted on an ad hoc basis across the seven counties, and stakeholders recognized that a centralized response to training needs would more effective and efficient in addressing the growing talent needs in the region.

In response to the surge in regional demand for skilled labor, Strada awarded WGTC a grant through their Employer and Community College Partnership Challenge to establish RWTC.<sup>4</sup> The goals of RWTC include:

- **Consolidate employer skills needs:** Create industry advisory boards to identify the most critical skills needs.
- **Provide quick-response training:** launch real-time, in-demand training to quickly upskill and reskill WGTC students and incumbent workers with the skills to compete and advance in their careers.
- **Certify training with micro-credentials:** develop stackable, credit-bearing micro-credentials and similar short-term skills training solutions that count toward industry-recognized certificates or degrees.
- **Expand the available workforce:** increase the availability of well-trained talent by focusing on traditionally under-represented populations in the manufacturing workforce, such as women and lower-income individuals.
- **Launch a sustainable industry-driven subscription business model:** create an innovative subscription model that allows employers to invest directly in in-demand training programs to secure new hires or upskill existing workers.

The grant provided funding to enhance physical infrastructure to meet employer training needs; embed industry-driven, hands-on learning opportunities; align and refresh curriculum; and increase staff resources to grow and market training opportunities. WGTC partnered with the Business-Higher Education Forum to support the development of RWTC by providing real-time labor market data on in-demand advanced manufacturing jobs, as well as technical assistance by importing national best practices on micro-credentials, non-credit to credit pathways, and apprenticeships. Throughout this process, the Business-Higher Education Forum also identified best practices to be shared nationally with other community colleges and employers looking to learn about and replicate this kind of work.

In one and a half years, RWTC has made significant progress toward its goals: it has conducted 1,100 training sessions, benefiting 1,600 learners. Its early successes quickly earned them the reputation of being the partner of choice for upskilling and reskilling among regional employers.

## CENTRALIZING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TRAINING AT WGTC

RWTC now serves as a centralized hub for workforce training programs, catering to the specific demands of regional industries. This endeavor required substantial investments in physical infrastructure, including renovations of an unused building on WGTC's Lagrange campus, procurement of state-of-the-art equipment for hands-on training, and the creation of a mobile classroom to enhance training accessibility. Additionally, WGTC bolstered its staffing resources, appointing key personnel dedicated to streamlining economic development efforts and coordinating training. These positions included a vice president for economic development, a coordinator, a director for continuing education, one full-time instructor, and two part-time instructors. Staffing and financial resources remain a challenge for meeting the increased demand for customized employer training.

## LAUNCHING THE SUBSCRIPTION MODEL

RWTC's subscription model is a forward-looking approach to meet the dynamic labor needs of employers and the community. The subscription model offers a suite of standardized trainings on topics such as leadership, OSHA, Six Sigma, and other areas that do not require employer customization.

This model incentivizes business to invest in workforce development by providing flexibility, scalability, and cost savings:

- Courses are offered multiple times during the academic year, so employers can send one to two employees to a training at a time that aligns with their production schedules.
- Employees can attend training with individuals from other companies or the community, guaranteeing minimal enrollment requirements for RWTC.
- Employers receive a discount for purchasing training seats in bulk.

3. [stradaeducation.org/eccpc/](https://stradaeducation.org/eccpc/)

4. [www.westgatech.edu/west-georgia-technical-college-receives-grant-to-strengthen-employer-partnerships-with-local-businesses-and-connect-learners-with-opportunity/](https://www.westgatech.edu/west-georgia-technical-college-receives-grant-to-strengthen-employer-partnerships-with-local-businesses-and-connect-learners-with-opportunity/)





The subscription model's implementation, however, revealed employers' preference for convenience over price when upskilling their workforces. Hosting a training at the local production facility is more valuable to an employer, and they are willing to pay a premium to conduct training in that way. Consequently, RWTC and economic development leaders believe a shift toward a community-oriented approach versus a broader regional approach can make training more affordable and accessible to underserved populations and improve alignment with regional economic development goals within the seven-county region. A more aggressive marketing campaign, which is one area the staff identified for improvement, can help make this pivot a success.

### EXPANDING EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT TO IDENTIFY AND MEET TALENT NEEDS

Collaboration with employers remains fundamental to RWTC's strategy of consolidating employer skills needs, providing innovative and quick-response training, and sustaining the overall program.

A cornerstone of RWTC's strategy was forming an advisory board that plays a pivotal role in steering RWTC toward meeting the current and future regional workforce needs. The advisory board discusses matters related to curriculum development and training programs. One initiative supported by the advisory board involved developing and disseminating a training-needs survey to human resources and department managers at regional employers to gather feedback on training requirements and in-demand skills across various industries. With 200 responses from businesses, members of the chamber of commerce, and development authorities from surrounding counties, RWTC identified critical roles and skills needs to align existing and create new courses and programs.

To date, RWTC has successfully trained employees from 32 employers, addressing immediate skills gaps and fostering long-term partnerships for sustainable talent development.

### ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS REPRESENTING REGIONAL TALENT NEEDS

Five representatives from key regional businesses and economic development organizations provide ongoing input and feedback on skill and training needs. Advisory board members serve a three-year term and meet twice a year. Current board members include representatives from:

Duracell

Hyundai Transys Georgia Powertrain

Kason Corporation

KIA Motors

Milliken Corporation

Troup County Development Authority



**STEVE CROMER**, VICE PRESIDENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, WEST GEORGIA TECHNICAL COLLEGE:

*The creation of the West Georgia Technical College Regional Workforce Training Center (RWTC) has enhanced the offerings of the Economic Development Division of the college with extended capabilities for corporate partnership and training. **Providing regional employers with the convenience of targeted, short-term training at RWTC, or with our mobile training units, has proven to be very effective throughout the west Georgia region.** RWTC provides a convenient and effective location for regional employers with targeted short-term training, on campus or onsite with our mobile training units.*



## TRAINING NEW TALENT WITH ADVANCED MANUFACTURING SKILLS

**Hyundai-Transys Georgia Powertrain** (Hyundai) developed a partnership with RWTC to provide skill training for new hires. Because Hyundai is the first transmission company based in this region, there isn't an existing talent pipeline of skilled labor for this industry. Hyundai is also building a second plant in the region, necessitating a fresh influx of trained personnel. By collaborating with RWTC, Hyundai is able to train candidates in specialized positions, such as CNC machinists, CNM operators, maintenance technicians, and others, thereby addressing critical skills shortages within the company.

A key aspect of this partnership involved RWTC staff conducting onsite visits to understand the specific machinery and equipment in order to incorporate these tools into the training facilities. Additionally, RWTC staff met with not only with HR staff at Hyundai, but also with department managers who provided specific information regarding technical training and skill needs. This direct engagement facilitated RWTC's ability to offer specialized training that was previously unavailable in the region.

## PROVIDING INNOVATIVE QUICK-RESPONSE GREEN SKILLS TRAINING WITH DELTA

**Delta Airlines** experienced an unprecedented rate of employee retirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a workforce shortfall when business returned to normal. Additionally with their global shift toward sustainability, Delta's ground support equipment (currently powered by internal combustion engines) are being replaced by electrically powered equivalents controlled by computers. Their aim is to reach 100 percent electrification in Delta hubs by 2035. Delta's ground systems equipment team partnered with RWTC to deliver customized training to keep its maintenance staff to speed with these technological advancements.

Delta consulted several technical schools to conduct this training, but RWTC stood out due to its innovative and rapid training approach. Unlike other institutions that adhered strictly to industry norms, RWTC offered tailored training that not only met employees at their current skill levels but also emphasized critical thinking and adaptation to the evolving industry landscape. The post-training evaluation revealed a 60 percent improvement in workforce capabilities through one week of concentrated training.



**DR. JULIE POST, PRESIDENT, WEST GEORGIA TECHNICAL COLLEGE:**

*As a technical college focused on workforce development, business/industry is our customer and students/trainees are our product. To be successful, we must support our partners in all possible ways to ensure they have a trained workforce; this includes credit and non-credit approaches. The Regional Workforce Training Center has been a wonderful and unique opportunity to do our part for the economic vitality of our communities and we are incredibly grateful for Strada's support in launching this initiative.*





## COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS THE TRAINING PARTNER OF CHOICE FOR EMPLOYERS

**T**HE RAPID GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENTS of RWTC underscore the pivotal role of community colleges in fostering regional economic growth, especially as a partner to employers looking to grow and hire new talent. Several key attributes make RWTC an indispensable partner for business:

**REGIONAL FOCUS AND UNDERSTANDING.** RWTC engaged a range of stakeholders in its development, including regional employers and development authorities, enhancing training relevance and impact. Leveraging their advisory board, skills assessments, and surveys enabled the delivery of workforce training with direct relevance to industry demands.

**COLLABORATIVE AND FORWARD-THINKING APPROACH WITH EMPLOYERS.** Feedback from employers consistently indicates that RWTC approaches customized training differently. RWTC takes the lead in identifying skill needs, removing this burden from the employer. Training design not only adheres to industry standards but also fosters critical thinking and adaptability among learners. These approaches ensure that learners remain responsive to the evolving dynamics of industry.

**THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX.** The president of WGTC has empowered her staff to take risks and be bold. This approach is evident with the implementation of the subscription model—a new, innovative model was piloted and is now being pivoted to a new audience. Even though the subscription model didn't work as initially intended, promoting it gave RWTC exposure to new employer partners outside their traditional outreach efforts.

**AGILE IMPLEMENTATION.** Despite limited resources, RWTC responds to employer requests in as little as three weeks. The mobile training unit has also expanded their capabilities to provide hands-on training off-campus, making it more accessible to employers.

**CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN A PERIOD OF RAPID GROWTH.** RWTC staff recognizes that the high demand for training requires fast implementation with continuous refinement of service delivery. This style of iteration helps address challenges in real-time, maximize impact, and builds trust with partners.

## CONCLUSION

RWTC has emerged as a pivotal force in upskilling and reskilling the regional workforce. Through strategic partnerships, innovative training approaches, and a commitment to meeting industry needs, **WGTC's Regional Workforce Training Center is poised to drive economic growth and address the evolving challenges** of the west central Georgia region.



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