

- **Uneven Application of Policy:** A few participants have observed that companies’ hiring policies related to criminal background are not applied across the board for everyone. For example, if the hiring manager knows the person with a criminal record, then they might look past it.

Table 4 | Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work (ranked)

Challenges*	Number of votes (#)	Percentage of votes (%)
Education and Training	9	17.0%
Child care	8	15.1%
Discrimination	8	15.1%
Health	6	11.3%
Criminal background	5	9.4%
Transportation	5	9.4%
Home life	5	9.4%
Disability	3	5.7%
Drug use	3	5.6%
Job-seeking Costs	1	1.9%

* Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Discrimination

- **Multiple Forms:** Most participants agreed that some people who hire discriminate against race or religion. Some participants explained that the discrimination is not just limited to African Americans, and that some hiring managers also discriminate against appearance (e.g., tattoos, hair).
- **Multiple Sources:** Participants also reported that in addition to discrimination by managers or supervisors, coworkers also discriminate. This could be observed in conversations or in the exclusion of certain coworkers from conversations.
- **Multiple Points:** Several participants reported that they experienced discrimination prior to getting the job and while they were employed. One participant explained that a person might be passed over for a promotion due to discrimination. Several participants agreed discrimination increases as they move up professionally.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants rated the difficulty associated with overcoming challenges on a scale of one (not difficult) to five (very difficult). The rated challenges included education and training, criminal background, and discrimination. According to participants’ ratings, they perceive these challenges as quite difficult to overcome when seeking meaningful employment. For example, a participant shared that a person’s difficulty in navigating life contributed to the challenges related to education and training. Given the themes discussed earlier, the challenge of criminal background seemed insurmountable to participants.

administrative positions, required the additional abilities. These entry-level employees must be apt to manage multiple tasks while addressing interruptions and adapting to shifting priorities.

Table 9 | Desired Skills and Experiences for Entry-level Positions in Small Businesses

Desired Skills and Experiences <i>“soft skills” in italics</i>	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of responses (%)
<i>Personality qualities (e.g., respectful, personable)</i>	16	22.2%
<i>Communication (e.g., use correct grammar)</i>	12	16.7%
Job-related skills and experience (e.g., construction knowledge, 1-2 years experience working on business networks)	9	12.5%
General skills, education, and experience (e.g., math, reading)	7	9.7%
<i>Problem solving and task management skills (e.g., work independently, follow instructions)</i>	6	8.33%
<i>Professionalism (e.g., appearance, drug free)</i>	6	8.33%
Office experience and computer skills	5	6.94%
<i>Teamwork (e.g., ability to work and communicate with a team)</i>	4	5.6%
Understanding the "big picture" (e.g., understanding how one’s position affects others)	3	4.2%
Physical activity	2	2.8%
Passion (e.g., enjoy job)	2	2.8%

Characteristics for Advancement within Company

As mentioned above, many participants are willing to invest time and money in the training and development of employees. These participants have identified a set of characteristics that indicate an employee’s potential to advance within the organization. When prompted, participants in the small business focus group generated 51 examples. (See Table 10.) The top three categories, personality qualities, communication skills, and problem solving and task management skills, were repeated and have been described in the previous section. Participants’ discussion of additional characteristics related to professional advancement are summarized:

- ***Vested interest in company:*** Several participants explained that employees with the potential for advancement seek knowledge of the industry, display a sense of pride for the company, and work as if he or she has a vested interest in the company. In addition, some participants shared that employees positioned for advancement also quickly learn the systems and procedures of an organization, complete their tasks in a timely manner, and understand how their position affects others and the success of the company.
- ***Willingness to learn:*** There was general agreement among participants that employees must be ambitious and committed to their growth – professionally and personally. Some participants

noted that employees must possess the desire to learn knowledge and skills relevant to the profession, and also identify what is needed for them to progress and advance.

- **Teamwork:** With regard to professional advancement, several participants emphasized that employees must demonstrate their ability to collaborate with other employees. Some discussed the notion of teamwork in two ways: (1) Employees must be able to effectively communicate with colleagues when working together on a project, such as simultaneously performing multiple repairs a vehicle. (2) When working in small-business setting, employees must be willing to “pitch in” where necessary and frequently contribute to the team.

Table 10 | Characteristics that Indicate the Potential to Advance in Small Businesses

Characteristics for Advancement <i>“soft skills” in italics</i>	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of Responses (%)
<i>Personality qualities (e.g., integrity, drive)</i>	21	41.2%
<i>Communication (e.g., speak and write clearly)</i>	8	15.7%
<i>Problem solving and task management abilities (e.g., set goals)</i>	7	13.7%
Vested interest in company (e.g., relates to company culture)	4	7.8%
<i>Professionalism (e.g., “be present with no drama”)</i>	4	7.8%
Willingness to learn	4	7.8%
<i>Teamwork (e.g., frequent contributions to team)</i>	3	5.9%

Confidence about Hiring Ideal Candidate

After participants shared the experiences, skills, and characteristics desired of their ideal candidate, the facilitator inquired about whether participants have ever hired their ideal candidate. Participants also rated their (a) confidence about their ability to hire an ideal candidate and (b) perceived difficulty associated with hiring an ideal candidate.

Each participant displayed a card with the number that reflected his or her confidence and difficulty ratings. Both rating scales ranged from one (not confident or not difficult) to five (very confident or very difficult). To foster discussion, the facilitator quickly reviewed each participant’s rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants’ reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

All participants reported to have hired their ideal candidate in the past. On average, participants reported to maintain some confidence (mean: 3.58, standard deviation: 1.00) that they are able to hire their ideal candidate. Many acknowledged that it takes time and a little bit of luck, and that often the ideal candidate approaches them first. Some of the participants who reported lower confidence ratings (a) explained that they have limited time to hire candidates or (b) have “come to terms” with the fact that they will hire an applicant that is less than ideal. A few participants reported that they offer a rigorous training process to close the gap between the skills and experiences they desire and a new employee’s existing skills and experiences.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Job Seekers Need Multiple Supports to Achieve Meaningful Work

Education and Training

Across the community and campus job-seeker focus groups, participants were enrolled in GED and trade-training classes. These participants held a diverse set of ideas about meaningful work, as evidenced by their reported ideal jobs (e.g., nurse, business owner, or welder) and the reasons they shared for pursuing these occupations (e.g., provide for their families, help people, or do something they enjoy). As expected, the majority of welding participants identified welding as an ideal job. Less than half considered welding a career choice prior to learning about the Accelerating Opportunity welding program. Participants' wide-ranging career aspirations suggest the need for training opportunities in multiple fields. Programs similar to Accelerating Opportunity may help job seekers narrow their career goals.

Reasons, such as helping people and enjoying the tasks of the reported ideal job, were mentioned more often among participants in the community groups and the Fast Track class. The participants in the welding campus group cited more reasons related to providing for themselves or their families; there was consensus that welding was a high-paying, in-demand career field. Interestingly, none of the welding participants provided reasons related to their desire to perform tasks related to welding (e.g., putting things together). Given the varied reasons for career pursuits among participants, training programs might benefit from presenting customized recruitment messages. This may increase the appeal of the program, as well as help job seekers identify a career that best fits their goals, interests, and values.

Community and campus participants articulated clear, chronological paths toward their ideal jobs. Most paths emphasized educational milestones, such as attaining a GED certificate or earning a degree. Compared to the other groups, the welding participants reported more milestones related to work experience and included these milestones earlier in their paths. The dual pursuit of a GED certificate and a trade degree may compel job seekers to prioritize work experiences earlier in their path toward their ideal job. Vocational programs offered at Woodville Tompkins Technical High School might also support similar career planning because students are simultaneously pursuing a high school diploma and training for a career.

On average, community and campus participants reported increased confidence when they predicated the likelihood of achieving their ideal jobs in three and five years. Participants might (a) perceive their current educational efforts as the most daunting challenges due to immediacy or limited success in previous educational experiences or (b) experience difficulty imagining future challenges related to their ideal careers. Given this, participants could benefit from academic and career advising that helps them realistically anticipate challenges beyond their current situation.

Broad-based Support Services

During all job-seeker focus groups, participants identified several significant challenges to achieving their ideal jobs, such as the cost of education and training, criminal background, discrimination, childcare, and transportation. While both groups generated a substantial list of existing and desired supports, the community participants discussed a broader set of services. These participants were notably more aware of community-based and nonprofit organizations that offered services related to education and training (e.g., free CDL classes), social supports (e.g., home ownership guidance), and financial assistance (e.g., tax support). This is likely attributed to the fact that their GED courses are embedded in

community centers that offer or refer these services. Campus job seekers may potentially benefit from increased awareness of these services via class announcements or flyers.

In addition, new and existing education and training programs should consider integrating social supports into their curriculum. Advising on available public assistance and local resources can provide basic support for job seekers while academic, career, and even personal counseling have the potential to give job seekers more personalized options for support. These types of services afford job seekers the opportunity to rely on more than sheer determination to persevere past the barriers to meaningful employment.

Job seekers should be encouraged to participate in fiscal education opportunities throughout their education and training. According to this study's demographic data, 44% of participants currently earn less than \$19,999, 31% earn less than \$34,999, and 41% receive public assistance (e.g., SNAP benefits). When jobs seekers with similar earnings secure meaningful employment, they will likely earn more money than they have before, and could benefit from guidance related to budgeting, navigating employer benefits (e.g., retirement, healthcare), and home ownership.

Also, several participants shared goals of becoming a business owner. These participants mentioned building credit, saving money, and securing grants and loans as ways to fund their future business ventures. While Savannah boasts many supports for current and future entrepreneurs, personal (and future business) fiscal health is critical to the success of any venture. In addition to the above-mentioned topics, these future business owners might benefit from additional savings strategies.

Job Seeking Supports

Across the community and campus groups, participants reported a limited number of milestones related to job seeking (e.g., interviewing, resume writing) in the paths to their ideal jobs. Also, prompting was necessary to initiate discussion of job-seeking resources. Some participants mentioned St. Joseph's Candler's St. Mary's Community Center, Step Up, and their teachers as supports in helping them find a job via mock interviews, career advising, and referrals. The following list offers recommendations to further support job seekers:

- ***Participate in networking activities.*** Several participants expressed frustration with "It's not what you know, but who you know." While this hiring practice might be perceived as unfair, word of mouth referrals play a key role in securing employment.
 - Job seekers should pursue opportunities that expand their social circles and create connections with people who already work jobs they desire or are employed with companies that offer relevant positions or career paths. These new connections could be professional acquaintances or mentors. Both would benefit job seekers.
 - In addition, job seekers might benefit from workshops that teach them how to network professionally or conduct career-related informational interviews to further support these efforts.
 - Savannah Technical College and partner organizations might consider offering events, including, but not limited to, job fairs that place job seekers in front of employers seeking applicants. While small businesses might only have a few positions available at a time, they should still be invited to meet with job seekers. These "family-like" work environments might be a better fit for many job seekers' professional and personal goals.

- **Identify "fit" with potential employers.** As job seekers learn interview skills, they should be prepared to identify which employers are likely to be a good "fit" for their personal and professional goals and values. While there was diversity among desired ideal jobs (even within a job seeker), many participants reported that they wanted to secure employment that allows them to contribute to their community, advance in a career, and learn more. Knowing which questions to ask can help job seekers better understand a company's core values, working culture, and opportunities for advancement positions which would create a more successful and sustainable relationship between themselves and the employer.
- **Showcase characteristics along with education and skills.** Participants in the small business focus groups prioritized personality characteristics (e.g., dependability and determination) and problem-solving and task management abilities (e.g., good judgment, time management and prioritization). While education and job-related skills are important, job seekers need to be able to explain how they have persevered past challenges, prioritized multiple responsibilities, and worked independently.
- **Participate in internships or apprentice opportunities to gain relevant work experience.** Many participants in the small business focus groups reported that they prefer relevant work experiences to accompany job seekers' education. Internship or apprentice opportunities afford job seekers the opportunity to apply their "book knowledge" in a fast-paced work environment with multiple and changing priorities. It also allows them to practice their professionalism (e.g., dress, communication skills, and positive attitude) and customer-service skills. As reported earlier, several small businesses are interested in offering internships opportunities.

Small Businesses Seek a “Softer” Type of Employee

Throughout the small business focus groups, participants emphasized their desire for employees to demonstrate “soft skills”, such as personality qualities, professionalism, communications skills, problem solving and task management skills. Several participants also expressed that employees who understood the “big picture” as it relates to company culture, policies, or procedures were well positioned to advance within their company. As participants discussed their desires and challenges related to hiring, many made the case that small businesses have different needs. These dynamic workplaces are often growing and are more sensitive to demand. This results in shifting priorities and necessitates a willingness and ability for employees to perform beyond his or her official job description and to frequently contribute to the team.

Participants ranked education and training and home life as a top hiring challenges. Few participants reported the confidence to overcome the home life challenge due to beliefs that they had limited ability to affect their employees’ personal lives. However, several participants did offer mentoring and personal development opportunities as potential ways to enable their employees to manage personal struggles.

On average, participants felt more confident that their businesses could overcome challenges related to education and training. To this end, many participants requested learning experiences for job seekers to address the needs of small businesses. When discussing challenges, many participants offered suggestions related to the education and training of job seekers at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. The recommendations below reflect these sentiments.

- **Foster a Desire to Learn:** The small business community is willing to extend the education of job seekers. For on-the-job training to be effective, the trainee must be coachable, i.e., willing to listen, ready to learn, and open to feedback. Early school and home experiences should spark curiosity. Learning experiences at school and in the community need to create repeated

opportunities for students to develop questions they wish to investigate, offer and receive constructive feedback, and recognize how working with others who contribute knowledge and expertise enhances thinking, services, and products.

- ***Develop Basic Business Knowledge:*** Hands-on experiences or classes that increase understanding of different business models, cash flow, operations, and key roles. This can potentially support applicants and new hires to better understand their role in relation to the success of the company, and make more relevant and compelling the expectations for standardized systems and processes.
- ***Increase Opportunities to Gain Work Experience:*** Small businesses and local educational institutions need to develop more partnerships where students can engage in intern, apprentice, or practicum experiences. It is important to note these experiences must extend beyond shadowing and neat projects that are peripheral to the company's operations. It is critical to small businesses that job seekers grow their ability to function in dynamic workplaces with competing priorities, a commitment to customer satisfaction, and requirement of personal responsibility and teamwork.

Discussion Guide (Job Seekers)

OBJECTIVE: To gain insight into the barriers (perceived and actual) to meaningful employment in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:

- participants' definitions and expectations about meaningful employment
- existing and desired supports while seeking meaningful employment
- perceptions of barriers to meaningful employment.

DISCUSSION: Participants will engage in a series of interactive discussions that use a variety of artifacts and activities to support the elicitation and sharing of participant ideas about each topic.

- *Data Collection:* The focus group will be audio recorded. All artifacts will be collected for further review.
- *Duration:* The focus group will last 2 hours.
- *Staffing:* Facilitator and Note taker

Optional sign-in & Refreshments served

Introductions - Name & Favorite Thing About Savannah

Discussion 1: Your Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about what meaningful employment means to them.]

Take a few moments to fill out the top part of your handout.

We will take turns sharing what we wrote.

- Question 1A | What is your ideal job? Give examples.
- Question 1B | Complete this sentence | When I work as a [1 ideal job], I can . . .
- Question 1C | On a scale of 1 (not confident) to 5 (super confident), how confident do you feel that you will achieve your ideal job in 1 | 3 | or 5 years?
Question 1D | Who would like to share why they selected their number?

Discussion 2: The Path to Your Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas what it requires to attain meaningful employment.]

- Question 2A | What are the steps do you need to take to achieve your ideal job?
- Question 2B | On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you that you will achieve step 1 | 2 | 3?
- Question 2C | Who would like to share their step why they selected their number?

Discussion 3: Supports on Your Path to Your Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' experiences about how they are supported to achieve their ideal job.]

- Question 3A | Who helps you on your path to achieve your ideal job? How?
- Question 3B | What programs help you on your path to achieve your ideal job? How?
 - Are there any programs that:
 - Prepare you to apply for a specific job
 - Help you obtain a certificate
 - Train you on specific skills
 - Put you in front of employers
- Question 3C | Which steps do you receive or expect to receive the most support? How?