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CNY's dialogue on jobs begins

Series of discussions will provide the outline for a jobs summit in March.

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Staff writer

A hundred people, clustered Wednesday in small groups in the hall and corners of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, talked about the challenges facing Central New York's work force.

What these employers, educators and trainers said at the first of several planned conversations with the community will become the backbone of a Journey 2 Jobs summit scheduled for March. Organizers hope the summit will help the metropolitan area create a work force that can compete in an increasingly global economy.

"Every single meeting I'm in, whether it's with the schools or business, it all gets back to jobs and the local economy," said event moderator Joel Delmonico, vice president-market manager Clear Channel Radio. "Patience is not a virtue anymore, we need to take action."

He introduced two experts who laid the groundwork for the discussion.

John Twomey, president of the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals, plied the early morning crowd with facts about the expected retirement of the baby boomer generation that will leave gaping holes in the available work force. He also discussed changing national demographics, U.S. high school and college graduation rates that fall below some foreign countries and the need for greater training for every job.

"Our global competitors think they are in a global competition, a war," he said. The U.S. needs to do the same, Twomey said.

It's no longer possible for a high school dropout with a "strong back and good attitude" to get a good job, he said.

The challenge of creating a qualified work force must be addressed at the local level, said presenter Lou Jean Fleron, economic initiatives director for the Institute for Industry Studies at Cornell University. Fleron said she was optimistic about Central New York's future.

After an hour of slides, the crowd broke into groups to consider questions on work force challenges and solutions.

The groups held wide-ranging discussions on topics such as the disconnect between unions and management, the need for early childhood education and the work ethic.

Training for the jobs available in the community dominated the conversation facilitated by Carol

Hill, of the chamber.

"Parents don't realize some jobs don't exist (in the community)," said Donna DeSiato, superintendent of the East Syracuse-Minoa School District. Yet, they continue to steer their children to those areas, she said.

"We need to create knowledge in the community that there needs to be a shift," she told her group.

Anthony J. Testa, a training specialist at Welch Allyn, a medical device maker in Skaneateles, told the group that his company has developed an in-house training program to meet its employment needs.

"We need to reinvent ourselves, and do it fast," he said.

Wednesday's meeting was the first of many conversations the Strategic Workforce Action Team will have with the community leading up to the Journey 2 Jobs summit.

The group has created a Web site www.j2j-cny.com and comments compiled from Wednesday's session will be posted there.

The next scheduled conversation will be on science, technology, mathematics and engineering education. It will be hosted by the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry 10 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. Dec. 7 at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo at Burnet Park, Syracuse.

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