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EDITOR'S PICK

TOPICAL

Brookings spotlights region's manufacturing, tech job development

Matt Glynn

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Western New York's manufacturing and technology sectors have prospects for robust job growth over the next several years.

- But both sectors are struggling to find enough trained workers to keep pace with current and expected hiring needs.

A new report **by the Brookings Institution spotlights** how the region is using coalitions to develop these sectors and tap into public and philanthropic funds.

And as the region gains economic momentum, the report said, "this layering of funding is positioned to attract more private-sector investment."

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A new Brookings report highlights how coalitions are supporting manufacturing and tech job growth in the region.

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The region's manufacturing jobs are expected to grow 12% from 2022 through 2032, doubling the 6% growth rate nationally, according to a projection by the **Western New York Regional Economic Development Council**. And local tech jobs, which are much scarcer here than they are nationally, are forecast to grow five times faster than the region as a whole by 2032, according to **TechBuffalo**.

Fact

ory employment across the region has been on the rebound over the past decade, after a difficult and lengthy period of decline that saw two of every five manufacturing jobs vanish. Since 2013, the region has added about 3,500 manufacturing jobs, a nearly 7% increase to its highest April level in 16 years, according to the most recent state Labor Department data.

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The drive to grow the manufacturing and tech sectors goes beyond just more hiring – there's a push to promote diversity in the ranks, to overcome high levels of poverty and geographic segregation, the Brookings report said.

The region is also “characterized by a sharp urban-rural divide,” with Allegany, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties historically “disconnected from Buffalo’s economic ecosystem,” the report said.

The Brookings report highlights the work of two coalitions to foster job growth that is more widely shared.

The **Western New York Advanced Manufacturing Coalition** won a \$25 million federal grant in 2022, as part of the Biden administration’s Build Back Better Challenge. The funding is supporting technology adoption by small and medium-sized companies, expansion of a workforce training program and redevelopment of industrial buildings in the Northland Corridor.

The other coalition, called the **Western New York Manufacturing and Tech Workforce Coalition**, was launched late last year, with \$29 million from Empire State Development and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation. This coalition brings together partners from education, business groups and training organizations. Its objective is to meet employers’ hiring needs by growing the skills of the workforce.

“Both coalitions are designed to counter historical patterns of concentrated disinvestment and extend inclusive growth opportunities to more rural and remote areas across Western New York’s Southern Tier,” the Brookings report said.

The manufacturing and tech coalition is led by executive director Stephen Tucker, who is also president and CEO of the Northland Workforce Training Center.

That coalition continues to grow, recruiting 35 companies to participate, Tucker said. Its co-chairs are from two of the region's leading private employers: Mike Wisler, M&T Bank's chief information officer, and Paul Wilkinson, Moog's chief human resources officer. The coalition has also added other organizations active in talent development.

Stephen Tucker, president and CEO of the Northland Workforce Training Center, discusses the center's 5-year strategic plan.

Matt Glynn

Peter Ahrens, executive director of the Buffalo Niagara Manufacturing Alliance, said the manufacturing and tech coalition is taking a methodical approach: identifying employers' needs and then working with training providers to meet those needs. That will allow graduates to step into in-demand careers, he said.

"I believe this intentional approach will increase awareness of the many career opportunities available to underemployed and unemployed workers," Ahrens said.

And the coalition will use key performance indicators to track what's working, and what isn't, and make adjustments, he said.

The Brookings report said the coalition approach can help the region tackle long-standing obstacles to wider-spread economic progress.

"These regional coalitions are fostering inclusive networks that will be critical to renewed economic growth by extending programs and projects to transcend urban-rural divides and cross historical residential segregation boundaries in the heart of Buffalo," the report said.

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