



Where's the Workforce?

Attracting Talent in a Changing Agri-Food Landscape

Illinois has an opportunity to be a top-tier destination for the education, retention, development, and career success of the professions needed for tomorrow's agri-food system. Yet it's struggling to attract the qualified talent necessary to meet and advance increasing sector demands in the 21st century.

On June 4th, 2019, FARM Illinois held a highly interactive, business-facing *At the Forefront* Series event to explore barriers and opportunities to attracting a skilled, diverse workforce. The following report highlights generated insight and will serve as a basis for charting a comprehensive agri-food workforce development strategy in Illinois.

Event hosted by:



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A COMPLEX CHALLENGE

The immediate scope and need for attracting a top-tier agri-food workforce in Illinois has to date been ill-defined and inadequately prioritized. Illinois' agri-food sector is the top economic generator in the state, valued at \$120 billion. However, the sector is expansive, complex, fragmented, and geographically dispersed, making it particularly challenging to pinpoint workforce-based needs and solutions.

Currently available data isn't necessarily comprehensive of the sector, systems-based, timely, or focused on future needs. Innovative research-based strategies and recommendations are therefore warranted that prioritize what's at stake and are inclusive of and address Illinois' full agri-food supply chain needs for the 21st century.

AT THE FOREFRONT

FARM Illinois' *At The Forefront* Series provides a platform for interested stakeholders to engage in vibrant dialogue around global issues of emerging interest in the food and agriculture landscape. During half-day events, sector leaders convene to establish new connections, share knowledge, identify best practices, and develop collaborative opportunities that will result in systemic change.

On June 4, nearly 50 attendees engaged in dynamic interaction regarding Illinois' agri-food workforce potential. The event featured provocative speakers who shared unique insight regarding the challenges and opportunities to developing a robust talent pipeline. Following remarks, participants engaged in interactive exchange of insight to chart an agri-food workforce development initiative across Illinois.

The event focused on barriers to attracting skilled talent across the agri-food supply chain with dialogue focusing on challenges and opportunities relative to three distinct themes:

1. Changing job trends, technologies and skillsets;
2. Awareness and perception of workforce opportunities; and,
3. Diversity, equity, inclusion, + justice.

The key insights generated reflect a dire need to recalibrate Illinois' workforce strategy when it comes to supporting agri-food and the suite of ancillary and interdependent industries. For Illinois to be an agri-food epicenter of talent, future efforts must be inclusive, forward-looking, timely, reflective of assets, and grounded in needs and realities of the 21st century.

The information provided in this report is a result of views expressed from a diverse gathering of stakeholders and do not necessarily reflect the views of any one participating group or individual. This is an evolving, not static document.

KEY INSIGHTS

Changing Trends, Technologies, and Skillsets

As the agri-food sector faces changing trends and technologies, workplace skillsets are being redefined. In turn, companies must adapt to stay competitive in increasingly tight markets.

Traditional workforce efforts can invest too many resources trying to ‘fix’ the worker.

Past workforce development efforts too often focus on fixing the worker instead of recalibrating antiquated business practices, models, and the workplace environment at the company level. Attention and energy need to instead be concentrated and infused into improving company strategies to create a stronger, innovative, and valued workforce.

Low wage structures and decreasing internal R&D has created an innovation gap.

Companies are increasingly looking to cut costs to stay competitive by creating low wage jobs, outsourcing their Research & Development (R&D), and/or relying on acquiring R&D through mergers and acquisitions. This has created a deteriorating effect across the supply chain as companies are becoming less innovative in terms of addressing evolving trends, technologies, and behaviors from within the workplace. The resulting lowered internal innovation capacity amongst workers leads to lowered strategic advancement of innovative products, practices, and purpose and a continually increased dependency on external innovation.

The information highway is a necessity in today’s work world, yet connectivity lags.

Having access to high speed internet is still a pipedream in many areas across the state. Farmers and companies in rural areas are disconnected from significant, real-time information flow. This poses a major disadvantage in terms of efficiency, connectivity, and productivity, and a hurdle to attracting a workforce that has broadband access. Lack of connectivity also minimizes opportunities for continuous or “ubiquitous learning,” everyday learning environments supported by internet-connected devices and wireless networks.

Automation will likely replace precision and routine, not social intelligence and creativity.

Ensuring quality jobs that lead to careers is of the utmost importance to employers. While it is impossible to know exactly how automation will impact the future of work, we do know that jobs and tasks that require dexterity, social intelligence, and creativity will continue to depend on human information.

Work identity is in part one’s personal identity, yet it is often forgotten or neglected.

People have “job arcs,” a series of skills that overtime create a sense of identity. In terms of attraction and transition, careers should value and respect worker identities. When we talk about career transition, we aren’t just talking about transitioning the job someone does but also how they see themselves. Continuous, ongoing learning opportunities can contribute to shaping future job arcs while advancing needed skillsets.

There are six ‘magic’ customers that organizations must consider but are often overlooked.

These customers are: the business itself, customers, vendors, shareholders, community, and employees. While we often think of customers as the primary stakeholder businesses serve, their success is dependent on the satisfaction of each of the six.

Perception and Awareness

The first step to growing a future workforce is to increase knowledge of the sector among those outside of it. Increasing positive perceptions and awareness of the industry can lead to a thriving workforce pipeline. This includes growing awareness from an early age, highlighting diversity, and showing the possible career arcs within the sector.

Farming as one option among many within the agri-food sector.

The agri-food sector creates careers across areas of specialization; from engineering to human resources, the sector offers opportunities for specializations beyond the farm. However, the general public may not know about the wide breadth of the sector. Agri-food needs to better highlight the diversity of the sector to the general population.

While professional opportunities are widespread, misperceptions still run rampant.

The agri-food sector needs to overcome job misperceptions. Those in the sector know that food and agriculture-related jobs can lead to fulfilling, dynamic careers, however, career pathways may be largely unknown to the general public. Agri-food jobs may be seen as dead-end, or entry-level despite the fact that the sector creates careers that can span a lifetime.

Linking opportunities to a compelling higher purpose is a gateway to attracting talent.

Millennials and Gen Z want to work for a purpose and are seeking workplaces that align with personal values. While agri-food faces a perception challenge, the industry could leverage values-based narratives such as “feeding the world” or “advancing health and nutrition” to communicate the larger purpose behind the sector. This combined with a greater articulation of the skills and development workers can gain within the industry could show people looking for jobs that the agri-food sector offers dynamic, exciting careers.

A four-year college degree is not the only pathway to professional and financial fulfillment.

The generation entering the workforce has been strongly encouraged to attend college, but there is an opportunity for people to have fulfilling and lucrative careers in skilled/technical positions. These increasingly abundant jobs often require training after high school, but don't require a higher education degree.

The urban-rural divide is a necessary gap to bridge to adequately staff agri-food positions.

The so-called urban-rural divide impacts agri-food businesses in a variety of ways, from creating less effective interpersonal relationships in organizations to overlooking potential consumers. To overcome this challenge, organizations must find ways to include people who may otherwise be outsiders and to celebrate difference as a means of becoming stronger.

Attracting talent to agri-food careers requires developing awareness about the opportunities.

Awareness of agri-food careers is traditionally generational. By including agri-food into school curriculums and culture, youth can gain knowledge and interest at an earlier age. Clubs like FFA and MANRRS (Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences), community gardens, science classes, and respected influencers – guidance counselors, teachers, mentors – all serve as critical professional pathway conduits for a wide audience of prospective talent.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion + Justice

By almost every measure, workforce populations will continue to become more diverse, more urbanized, and more mobile in the future. Diversity can ultimately lead to positive employer impact in terms of representation, performance, and innovation. By increasing the diversity within an organization, including diversity of background and experience, employers can leverage new perspectives to innovate and create a competitive edge. However, they must do so equitably and inclusively and take into consideration historical injustices.

Competency based hiring is essential for a more dynamic workforce.

Traditional hiring often focuses on an applicant's experience with similar tasks or responsibilities to assess their eligibility for a role. It also includes 'like me' bias that causes people to disproportionately favor individuals like themselves, whether it be tied to ethnicity, gender, nationality, career history, educational background, etc. Hiring high-capacity employees based on merit and who fit an organization's goals and can learn the specific skills required for a role could result in a more diverse and nimbler workforce.

Removing barriers to employment helps reduce disparate impacts and increase equity.

Increasing equity in the workforce isn't just about hiring choices. In order for a candidate to succeed, as many employment barriers as possible must be removed e.g. housing, childcare, transportation, incarceration, etc.

Tomorrow's leaders need empathetic mentors who can guide and advocate for their success.

To further equity, we must think about mentorship, retention, and promotion of people of color and other underrepresented populations into career pathways in the agri-food sector. Effective mentorship comes from people who can model success and understand the specific challenges mentees face.

Relocation can alleviate burden of transportation access, commute time, and isolation.

Many agri-food jobs are in suburban or rural locations which can pose challenges for urban members of the workforce for a variety of reasons such as lack of transportation, length of commute, and insufficient means to relocate. Organizations hoping to attract new talent to their areas must avoid pitfalls of isolation and focus on inclusion to welcome people into their communities. Relocation could be particularly enticing to housing insecure populations.

Slavery has a lasting cultural impact with negative connotations that need to be addressed.

African Americans are currently underrepresented in agri-food. Especially within agriculture and production, it is imperative to understand cultural implications within the black community. Other populations, like the Latinx community also face cultural barriers to entering the agri-food sector, which must be understood and addressed.

Recruiting underrepresented workers requires a concerted effort to expand hiring networks.

To encourage true diversity in hiring, employers need to move away from simply utilizing job-placement platforms such as Indeed and LinkedIn and reach out through established networks that reach diverse populations.

KEY QUESTIONS

Several questions emerged during the June 4th *At the Forefront* event that are necessary to advance a comprehensive agri-food workforce initiative in Illinois.

1. What workforce efforts are already proving successful and how can they be maximized?
2. What are the gaps in agri-food employment that are not being met by existing efforts?
3. Which populations are underrepresented in Illinois' agri-food workforce?
4. What policy solutions at federal and state levels could impact the agri-food workforce?
5. How can the agri-food system collectively champion diversity, equity, inclusion, justice?
6. What in-the-classroom or continuous learning opportunities within the Illinois education system focus on food and agriculture? Can the opportunities be enhanced or more widely utilized?
7. How can stakeholders across the sector maintain engagement in workforce efforts (i.e. private sector, higher education, government, non-profits, etc.)
8. How can a workforce development initiative gain buy-in from all players in the agri-food supply chain, both large and small, from production through consumption?
9. How do we equitably create a deeper agri-food workforce and resource pipeline?
10. How will immigration reform change the demographics of Illinois' agri-food workforce?

NEXT STEPS

Illinois has a rich agri-food sector across the state. While the first workforce-oriented FARM IL *At the Forefront* event took place in Chicago, FARM Illinois will continue the discussion across Illinois. As a result, this document will evolve to show key insights gleaned from a wide array of participating stakeholders. These events will shape the development of an actionable, forward-looking workforce agenda that positions Illinois as a top-tier agri-food workforce destination.

JUNE 4 PARTICIPATING STAKEHOLDERS

Featured Presenters

Peter Creticos

*The many futures of work:
changing job trends and
skillsets*

President & Executive
Director

**Institute for Work & the
Economy**

Beth Fannin

*Attracting workforce talent:
awareness and perception of
agri-food opportunities*

Senior Manager Talent
Acquisition

GROWMARK, Inc.

Danielle Perry

*Building a culture of talent:
diversity, equity, inclusion,
and justice*

Executive Director

Growing Home Inc.

JUNE 4 PARTICIPATING ENTITIES

ARi

Chicago High School for
Agricultural Sciences

Chicagoland Workforce
Funder Alliance

City of Chicago, Department
of Planning and
Development

CME Group

Education Systems Center

FARM Illinois

Foresight Design Initiative

Gary Comer Youth Center

Gourmet Gorilla

Grand Victoria Foundation

Granular

Growing Home, Inc.

GROWMARK, Inc.

Illinois Agricultural
Leadership Foundation

Illinois AgriNews

Illinois Community College
Board

Illinois Farm Bureau

Illinois Science & Technology
Coalition and Institute

Illinois Soybean Association

Institute for Work and the
Economy

Kane County Development

Kinship Foundation

McHenry County College

Microsoft

MPEA

SAVOR

The Development
Consortium

Top Box Foods

University of Illinois at
Chicago

University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign, College
of ACES

UpField Group

Walton Personal
Philanthropy Group

Windy City Harvest Chicago
Botanic Garden

FARM Illinois



A FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ROADMAP FOR ILLINOIS



MAY 2015



The FARM Illinois RoadMap, released in May 2015, brought together over 150 leading stakeholders to develop a plan to support Illinois' future stake in food and agriculture. The plan outlined six key priority areas and 23 actionable recommendations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Mission Statement

The mission of FARM Illinois is to position Illinois as the global leader in food and agriculture system innovation by convening and connecting stakeholders to catalyze and champion actions that will grow the economy, support community health, and sustain the environment.

About

FARM Illinois is an agri-food alliance for the 21st century, building an integrated, innovative, and transformative agri-food system for the future. As a neutral, third-party catalyst, FARM Illinois convenes cross-sector partners to connect talent, share insight, align strategies, spark ideas, improve coordination, accelerate growth, increase visibility, and build trust – ingredients essential to driving forward-thinking solutions that meet the most pressing economic, environmental, and societal challenges of today and tomorrow.

The FARM Illinois Roadmap's six goals:

- Leadership for Innovation:** Develop an integrated, statewide, long-term, public-private strategy for achieving the goals of the FARM Illinois strategic plan.
- Business Development and Entrepreneurship:** Spur business growth and investment by making Illinois the preferred destination for food and agriculture companies of all sizes.
- Workforce and Education:** Develop a high-quality workforce for food and agriculture and educate Illinois policy makers and the general public on sector innovation.
- Resource Management:** Ensure that Illinois is sustainably protecting and managing its natural resources.
- Infrastructure:** Ensure Illinois' infrastructure is capable of supporting the state's ability to sustainably meet its own needs while being a global leader in food and agriculture.
- Branding and Market Development:** Develop larger and more diverse local, regional, national, and international markets for Illinois' agriculture and food products by raising Illinois' profile.