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# Jobs, Jobs, Jobs! - A West Virginia Work Ethic



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Bill Bissett is President of the West Virginia Manufacturers Association. A native West Virginian, Bissett previously served as State Director for United States Senator Shelley Moore Capito. Prior to his role with Senator Capito, he served as President and CEO of the Huntington Regional Chamber of Commerce; President of the Kentucky Coal Association; Chief of Staff and Senior Vice President for Communications at Marshall University; and Vice President of Public Relations for Charles Ryan Associates. Bissett earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from Marshall University, in addition to receiving his commission in the United States Army.

*“What do you mean, you can’t find a job? I have three jobs. Take one of mine!” – Chris Rock, Comedian*

As someone with a diverse career path and degrees in liberal arts, journalism, and education, I was intrigued when my friends at Bowles Rice asked me to write about the topic of workforce. As a native West Virginian who has worked mostly in the Mountain State, I am well familiar with the bottom rankings of my fellow West Virginians in workforce participation, which an economist from West Virginia University once described to me that my home state “had a lock on being 50th in workforce participation since the 1970s.” This gloomy statistic and commentary have stuck with me over the years and continues to plague West Virginia and those of us tasked with trying to address this problem.

While often discussed and combined with an “all hands on deck!” message to fix it, I wonder how much progress we are actually making, especially as new employers like Nucor Steel, Berkshire Hathaway Energy, and Form Energy (see photos opposite page) choose West Virginia for investment and existing companies expand



A few years ago, I concluded that I like to work. I enjoy a challenge. I like to be someone with either the experience, education, or both to meet the challenge at hand. Simply put, it is nice to be needed and hopefully qualified when a job needs doing. My career has taken many twists and turns. Some of these changes have happened organically, some by design, and some by complete luck, but it has been a fun ride thus far.

It is this joy of work, as well as the compensation and identity that one gains from work, that makes someone not working who could work difficult for me to understand. When I discuss workforce participation with WVU’s Dr. John Deskins or other experts, I quickly learn that not everyone is raised with role models of working parents and influencers that show them the importance of gainful employment. Not every West Virginian

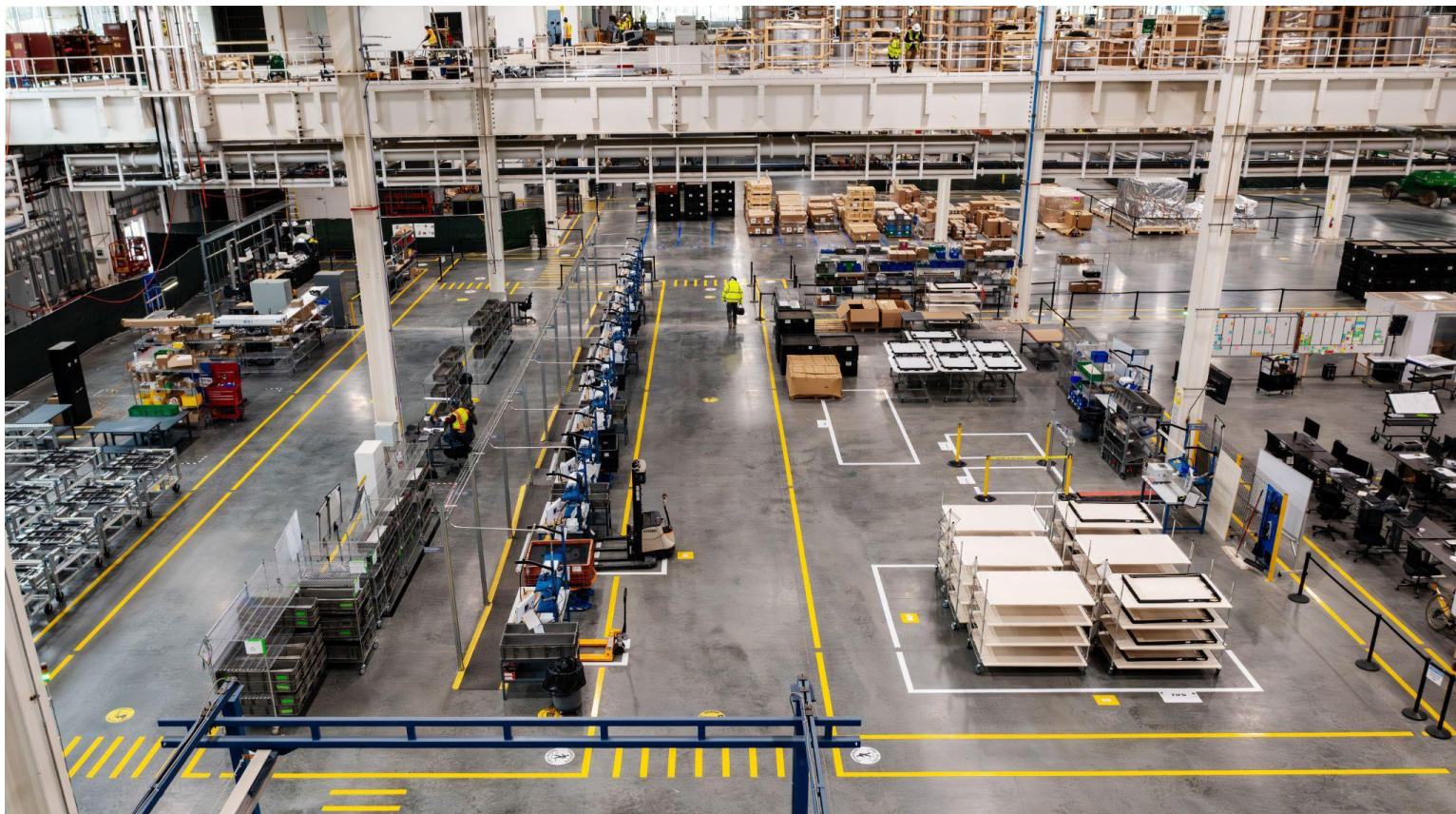
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**“I have often nodded along when a politician says, ‘A good job fixes a lot of problems,’ because I believe that to be true.”**

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their operations. With the most significant economic uptick here that I have witnessed in my nearly six decades in West Virginia, I share the thought of others – who is going to fill all of these open positions?

joins the military and gains those hardwired principles of showing up, showing up on time, and showing up prepared. And not every West Virginian has stood on the shoulders of proverbial giants who propelled their career and cheered them on as they moved forward.



While I have rarely felt like success was handed to me, I did have a clear advantage compared to those West Virginians raised in other environments and in more rural parts of the Mountain State where opportunities and experiences might be less common.

So, starting with the understanding that I do not understand what keeps an individual from employment who could work requires an obvious next step – to listen and learn. While data and demographics help, difficult conversations with people who could work but choose not to must happen. We also must recognize and work diligently to remove any impediment to employment that prevents our neighbors from working,



such as childcare, transportation, or other physical needs. To remove these impediments, the solutions must work for both the employee and employer with the involvement of the public sector. In my discussions with workforce experts, other cultural and psychological factors come into play, such as the fear of failure or the lack of confidence to make changes in one's life.

We have all faced hopelessness at times in our lives, but a paralysis to strive for something new or greater can be a factor in social mobility and “getting above your raising” by pursuing a new career or post-secondary education. I have often nodded along when a politician says, “A good job fixes a lot of problems,” because I believe that to be true. I have witnessed it firsthand and through my family and friends. From a stable income to health insurance to less stress (at least financially), good jobs can be found in West Virginia if you are willing to pursue them.

We need to work collectively on helping unemployed individuals who can work find the tools and training that they need to fill these positions, which not only help the individual but also all of us West Virginians. It is a challenge that we have had for decades and will not be solved quickly, but it is a challenge worth tackling as we have the opportunities that can be, as Horace Mann said about education, “the great equalizer of the conditions of men” and truly transform the workforce and wellbeing of our fellow West Virginians. 