

Workforce dynamo

Chamber recruiting puts sustainability at its core

After national approval of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) recommendations in 2005, leaders of the Huntsville region came together to prepare for the largest economic development project in Alabama history.

Few, if any, cities across the nation have ever taken such an aggressive, optimistic approach to building a sustainable workforce recruiting, retention and outside community awareness campaign like the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County. The “A Smart Place to Live, Work and Play” campaign

has momentum and with a ticking timetable for completion in 2011, the Chamber has no intentions of letting up.

“Our formal research shows Huntsville’s greatest demand is for mid-level professionals with five to 25 years experience in engineering, IT, advanced manufacturing, and preferably, existing security clearances,” explains Lucia Cape, vice-president of the Workforce Division. “The challenge is getting these people here and exposing them to our safe, beautiful, family-friendly community.”

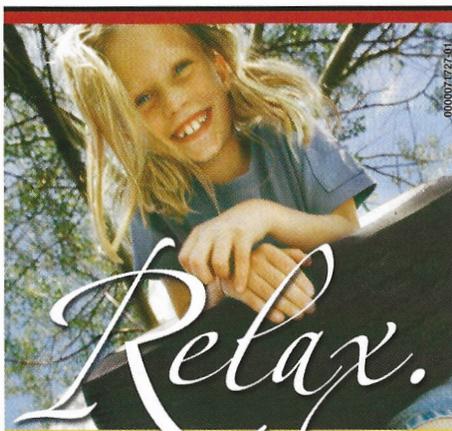
On-site recruiting

The Chamber team has several tools in place to drive its campaign, including partnering with local companies to attend a series of career expos to do on-site recruiting. Partners can have their own booth space, but share expenses.

“We attended three of these expos in key technology and engineering cities last year and we had such success, we are adding a fourth venue in 2009,” says Mark Brown, director of workforce recruitment for the Chamber.

Targeting displaced workers, passive workers who currently have jobs but may be open to a change if options presented

By KIMBERLY BALLARD



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themselves and professionals who have been out of the workforce, but want back in has proven to be a successful tactic. The Chamber also watches for companies known to be downsizing. "We try to head people off before they get caught up in layoffs, scoop them up, and bring them to Huntsville where their skills and experience are needed," Cape says.

According to Joe Alexander, a member of the executive committee and vice chair of workforce for the Chamber, people's reaction to possibly moving to Huntsville varies, but many mid-level professionals are willing to consider it. "Communication is the key. Huntsville is no secret to engineers in well-developed technology communities like Fairfax County, Va., for instance. I explain to them Huntsville is a big, friendlier chunk of Fairfax County, plopped down in a beautiful valley without the traffic congestion."

Huntsville is touted as a place with a high standard of living, great business and advancement opportunities, and a

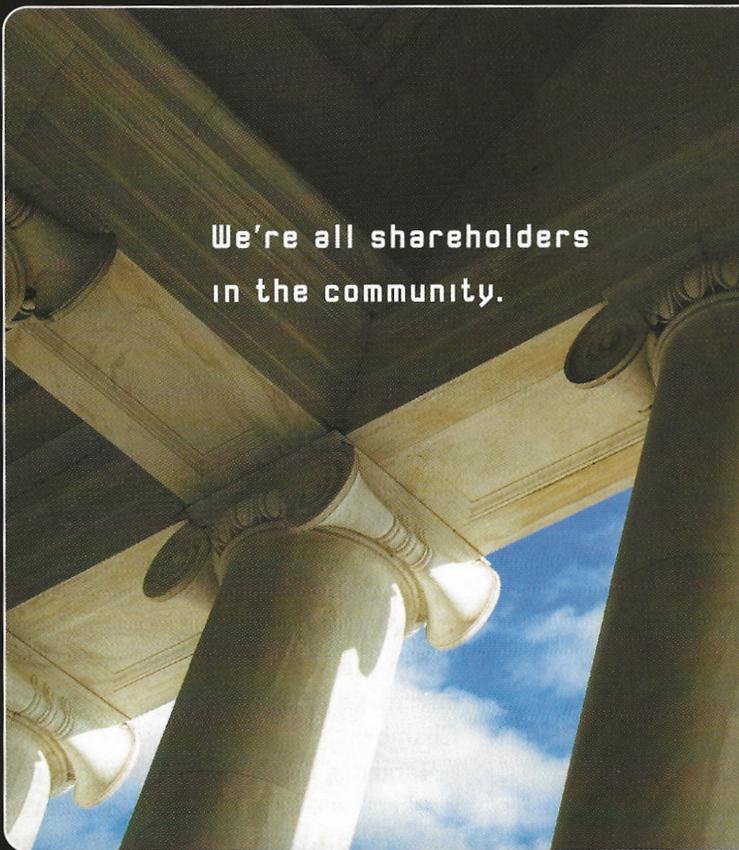
safe, fun atmosphere to raise a family, and compete information on all that is at the Chamber's 'Smart Place' portal at www.asmartplace.com. "When potential recruits go to the 'Smart Place' portal, they find the answers to all their questions about Huntsville and they have access to the job boards, all in one place," Brown says.

"When they come to visit Huntsville, they are impressed. And once they get here with their families, they rarely want to leave," says Alexander.

Attracting top graduates

The focus is on the experienced professional, but the Chamber's workforce initiatives drive hard to recruit graduate students, interns and cooperative students from the top engineering schools in the nation. "The entry-level worker doesn't know as much about Huntsville as the mid-level professional, so we have a different challenge with them," says Alexander.

"The 20- to 30-year-old age bracket is under-represented in Huntsville,"



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Dave Dieter

As part of the Chamber's Bridge Class, students work together to get from one platform to another using two planks.

explains Cape.

Younger workers who come to Huntsville make a good living, and they are increasingly finding more in the area to fit their lifestyles. The Chamber has its Bridges program to get younger people more engaged in community activities.

Designed for young college graduates, interns or co-op students working part time and still going to school, Bridges classes are held each spring and summer to help them network with people their own age. "They live out the 'Live, Work and Play' theme," says Brown. "We give them cost of living information; we show them opportunities for advanced degrees and introduce them to businesses who need their skills. Finally, we have 'Play' days where they are taught confidence-building exercises, team-building skills and critical thinking proficiency, out on the ropes obstacle course near the U.S. Space & Rocket Center."

Classes are small – around 25 students – and young professionals develop relationships through advisors, civic clubs, volunteering, recreational activities and social events in the area. "The idea is to get them engaged in the community so they are more likely to commit long-term," Cape says. "It is another way for us to support our members in need of recruiting and retaining highly skilled professionals," says

Cape. "Anything we do in a supportive role benefits everyone."

'Safe, clean neighborhoods'

Cape believes there is another very powerful force at work in the decision to pick up and move the family to Huntsville. "Spouses are looking for good schools for their children. They want faith-based churches and safe, clean neighborhoods. Many of them give up jobs of their own when their spouse takes a job in Huntsville. We provide a Web site where they can search for jobs and support services, as well."

Having *Popular Science* magazine name Huntsville one of America's Leading "Green" Cities, *National Geographic* name Huntsville one of the country's "Top Adventure Towns" and *Computerworld* recognize Huntsville as one of America's "Top 5 Technology Cities" helps reinforce the Chamber's efforts.

The Chamber team is excited about the future of workforce recruitment and retention programs because there are still thousands of BRAC jobs that have not yet moved to Huntsville. Cape says, "We have no intention of slowing down our efforts."