

Episode 47 features Tonia Saunders, who leads both workforce and economic development in Lucas County, Ohio. This Work Ready Community (WRC) integrated the two disciplines, emphasizing the role of collaboration with neighboring counties to enhance the region's competitiveness. Tonia shares insights on tackling workforce challenges, leveraging community partnerships and innovative strategies to serve the manufacturing and healthcare industries effectively. The episode highlights the success of Lucas County's WRC initiative, showcasing how it drives economic growth and improves employment opportunities through targeted employer engagement and comprehensive support services. This conversation underlines the importance of synergy between workforce and economic development in achieving regional prosperity.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 47



Tonia Saunders, Director

[Work Ready Lucas County, Planning and Development](#)

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Links and Resources

- [Episode 47 of Podcast](#)
- [WRC Profile of Lucas County, Ohio](#)
- [Workforce Summit Overview from ACT](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
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Transcript of Episode 47

Jingle Open with Music: *Let's Get Ready for Work*

Tonia: Challenges present opportunities as well. So, I think that's what Work Ready Lucas County, how that birthing process began. We had a challenge. We had two automotive. We were able to develop the workforce to be able to deliver over 400 individuals for those available positions.

Jasen: Tonia Saunders leads both workforce and economic development as an integrated director in Lucas County, a Work Ready Community in the Toledo region of Ohio. Check out the latest trends of ecosystem integration coming up on Episode 47.

Ready for Work Jingle Open: Ready for Work is a podcast from ACT, spotlighting excellence and innovation throughout the workforce ecosystem. Jasen Jones hosts this journey with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach it's highest potential. Now, let's ready for work!

Jasen: Before coming to A-C-T, I enjoyed careers in both economic development and workforce development, but never at the same time! Today's guest is wearing both of those hats in a bustling portion of the Toledo metro.

On this episode of Ready for Work, we dig deeper on the benefits of integrating workforce and economic development, serving new and expanding employers alike, with NCRC-credentialed workers. Tonya shares best practices on how their 1-to-1 services to working learners evolved since the pandemic, the following wave of economic growth, and tips for maximizing employer engagement. Thanks for joining us, Tonia, on Ready for Work.

Tonia: Absolutely

Jasen: Take us on a quick flyover of your Work Ready Community, Tonya, with its industry targets and importance to the greater Toledo region.

Tonia: The primary industries that we serve is in manufacturing, and we have a large health care system, few health care systems here. So ideally, Lucas County is considered an urban metro through our comprehensive economic development plan that would encompass neighboring counties, Wood County, Ottawa County - Lucas County serves as an anchor, if you will. So, as it relates to development, certainly Wood County has a lot of more land space and opportunities, but Lucas County has the workforce. Same with Ottawa, a little bit more of a distance there, but the beauty of it is we collaborate very well amongst those neighboring counties.

Jasen: As a certified, and now maintained, Work Ready Community, how important was it to collaborate regionally?

Tonia: The strategies that we can collaborate on, would work somewhere else. And that goes, even beyond northwest Ohio. I'm fortunate enough to be in an association of very dynamic directors all across the state of Ohio, that serve as the workforce board directors. I've met with some of them to say, hey, this is pretty substantial of what Lucas County's going to be facing. We haven't been here in a long time.

Jasen: Those workforce practitioner networks are so important to this role.

Tonia: I had another workforce board director. He actually has what we call the small country known as Area Seven, which is comprised of 43 counties and one workforce area.

Some years back they experienced a significant mass layoff that had, I believe, 6 to 8000 workers. That's my person I need to talk to about how do we handle something similar in the 2000s, potentially 3,000 in our area. So, I think that's the benefactor. I think that's how we're adjusting to the challenges

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Jasen: One of the best features in the fusion of workforce and economic development is how they both maximize one another's outcomes.

Tonia: So, in September of 2018 is when we actually met our initial certification as a Work Ready Community. Prior to that, the challenge came in that we needed to deliver over 400 workers to supply workers for two automotive suppliers within the Toledo region. The beauty of that it was actually in a high poverty area to reach those individuals. And the ideas, you know, when we talked with the two employers, Dana Corporation and Detroit Manufacturing Systems, now known as Mako, we had the opportunity to sit down and talk to the employers. If you want to seek out these communities, here's what we see the challenges are and what are you willing to do? What's acceptable, what's not acceptable? And we literally designed a county program aside what we would do in our normal WIOA programming to say, we not only want to prepare individuals, for interviewing and preparing a presentable resume or presenting themselves, we want to deal with the life issues and the challenges they face right now every day so that we can address those.

And again, going back to collaboration, that was an extension out to WIOA partners and community partners to say we need reentry services, we need transportation and we need daycare. We need all of the day-to-day things that most of us don't think about. We know how we're going to get to work in the morning and we're not worried about food access or housing. And so, we wanted to, really collaborate to have all those partners in a room. We designed a checklist that we had the two employers certify to say if we could have all of these issues and potential barriers checked off, that they have accomplished, along with our National Career Readiness Certificate, would you consider interviewing these folks as a guarantee. These individuals are doing this on a volunteer basis? Honestly, to complete all of these actions is not attached to stabilizing or maintaining their benefits. This is to say if you want to work for Data Corporation or you want to work for Detroit Manufacturing Systems at the time, this is what's going to set you apart from the thousands of workers that's interested in the positions.

Jasen: Thank you for sharing this inspiration with us, Tonia. This is so motivating for those doing this difficult each day, but it's so worth it.

Tonia: Challenges present opportunities as well. So, I think that's what Work Ready Lucas County, how that birthing process began. We had a challenge. We had, two automotive suppliers. The beauty of that, as the buildings were being developed and built out, we were able to develop the workforce be able to deliver over 400 individuals for those available positions.

Jasen: Our listeners will be interested in hearing how this structure evolved and how this momentum generated progress.

Tonia: Absolutely. So, I think there's a few advantages. JobsOhio certainly serves as an anchor, and a gateway to understanding in some instances, employer's needs, before they even land here. We're kind of collecting, that insight as it will change because we know how, economic development happens. We know how those projects there's a timeline. But that timeline is subject to change for various reasons. I would say really leveraging and honing in on the partnerships with JobsOhio.

Secondly, I think a benefactor that Lucas County has is that years ago, we decided to incorporate our workforce and economic development departments together so that we have right up front. We know I'm serving in both capacities to know, okay, we know there's some projects coming up and there's 400 workers that's needed. So, I think that was a benefactor to kind of spearhead us in to saying we got to talk to Dana, we need to talk with Detroit Manufacturing System to understand what their needs are. that was the benefactor of getting in the doors and really just helping to understand that the services that, whether it be through Ohio-Means-Jobs, job centers, the county economic development side of the house is that we are also dealing with the headaches that businesses are coming across when it comes down to the recruitment process and the onboarding process, that we have solutions for that as well.

So, if you're a new company coming in town and your building may not be open, but you need to begin to ramp up training, you need to have a space to be able to conduct interviews and orientations. We have supplied that for employers as well, which is invaluable because it's at no cost to them to say our facility is here to serve businesses, along with preparing the workforce for businesses.

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Jasen: The workforce ecosystem radiating from Lucas County has helped your Work Ready Community be competitive as well. Walk us through your partnership.

Tonia: Now we have gotten to that place that we see the value, and certainly ACT has really heightened, Site Selection has noted, that this is an economic development tool and it gives me, such positivity. And knowing some of my colleagues in the economic development space. And we're, you know, at conferences and I hear them talking about workforce without me having to be, okay when we take my economic development hat off and let me be the workforce person to bring workforce to the conversation, the economic developers, they're doing it on their own because they see the value of it. They see how it's an anchor. It's not a hindrance in this process. They're offering insight to us to say, we have issues as it relates to the skills gap. It has increased. especially in the manufacturer of space. When you look at the skills trades, all of those are concerns. I think we're all balancing to understand how do we address that.

And so, I think if I could give any advice in that area, that is so critical. That's what has been successful for us. It's taken us a while to get here. But now that we're here, the process much more seamless. And it's really been insightful for me as a person serving in a dual role because there's certainly a lot that I can learn in the economic development space. And so if I'm in a role I need to be that advocate for what economic development looks like, how do we charge whether I'm in a space with elected officials or I'm in with practitioners, this is how we're going to increase our attraction.

Jasen: With employer needs fluctuating as wildly as ever, what has made the difference for employer engagement in Lucas County.

Tonia: One of the frustrations that I think steers employers away. This is Tonya Saunders saying this. I'm not speaking on behalf of any elected official, but this is Tonya saying this. They don't see that we're working collaboratively within the city and the county and the port and for all of the entities that's going to be responsible for the success of this employer, whether it's an expansion project or it's a new company saying, why would I come to Lucas County? On the front end of that is. I would feel better as an employer knowing, Wow! I had city. I had the county. I had the port. I had the regional growth partners, JobsOhio, I have utilities. I have higher education. I have all of that in this world for me to answer all of my questions and help me to understand what does Lucas County, Northwest Ohio look like as a region? So I think that is a critical role. It takes a lot of intention and strategy to align the interests there. And again, that's how we are able to effectively leverage those dollars that can move the project forward, keep the engagement and the interest level of that employer. And I think we have finally I've been doing this for a very long time, almost

20 years, and it feels like 40, you know, 20 years. And we finally come to a place where economic development understands the heightened state and the need for workforce development. And it's taken quite a while to get there. And I don't discard why it wasn't there. I don't because, again, it comes back down to collaborative efforts, partnership being intentional with the partnerships to understand. These are the tools that are toolbox and how do we use those tools to leverage and to really represent the region in a way that is attractive to employers.

Jasen: What are some of the other features your partnership offers to employers?

Tonia: Also having building regulations incorporated under our department is showing that we have all of the tools in our toolbox the effort is to streamline the process, because I think that is a task that many employers face to say, how long is this going to take? You know, is it going to be hangups with permitting and zoning, etc., if they go with a build or even if they decide to, you know, rehab or to expand? And so I think that presents upfront that we have, a more streamlined approach, if you will. The second piece that I would offer on the workforce side of it is that we are presenting opportunity for employers that even while they're developing the bricks and mortar, we are developing the workforce and this is how we're doing that through our ACT in our work.

When you look at county program, we're also identifying and doing the talent match for those positions. And as we offer the wide variety of business services training funds and as you mentioned, yes, it's not a direct bond. It is based on a reimbursement, but it's matching what the employer is investing in, whether it be the new workforce that they bring on or we're even here to serve their incumbents, because that is retention tool.

Jasen: Employers tuned in, are by now eager to hear, how retention is working out for those employers participating in your Work Ready Community.

Tonia: Even today, I think it's been looming for quite a while. We go back ten years. Retention has always been an issue for businesses. How do we retain the talent that we know that we have and they may not have the, ability to increase wages. And so being strategic around, how what are some other ways? I mean, today when we look at what motivates a worker to stay, in some cases this flexibility, it could be better benefits. we've literally heard folks say I'll take a dollar less if I have better benefits or flexibility. That's insight that we can present to those employers when they ask the question to say, what's the motivation of the workforce in Lucas County? And so we can share that, with the employers for consideration.

The other tool that I would offer is the labor market information, because I think it's important for employers to know upfront how do they match up and they understand what the market looks

like and what are the compelling wages to either attract initial employers or, again, in retaining their incumbent. Those are tools that are readily available that we're presenting that critical data that, they're not being tasked to do and have to hire consulting firm to do that, which is very expensive. So we're utilizing Ohio labor market information and we extend out even into Michigan as well present that.

The other thing that I would offer is, how we're creating these packages to leverage funds that's even outside of we in our workforce dollars that we can tap into, the economic development budget and we can tap in and make, you know, recommendations as it relates to, JobsOhio. This is a company that's going to need a lot of marketing and that exceeds the outreach efforts that we can do. And so, leveraging those things, I think, are so key points that kind of sets us a little bit apart. leveraging our community and our higher end to be able to present, hey, here's the next ready, skilled labor. You know, engineering I think is a challenge across the state of Ohio in obtaining the high variety of engineers that are needed in I.T., I mean, all across the board. And how are we able to deliver that? We have the next graduating class. And, the University of Toledo has an excellent engineering program. I think those are some of the key points of how we're leveraging.

Not only are all of partners, and our economic development partners, but our community - one of the retention factors of workers is do they love to live and play here? Showing the attractions of Lucas County - a top notch zoo. We have a top notch museum. We're within an hour of Cedar Point and we have, people that come from other countries go to Cedar Point. I think having a comprehensive approach of really selling our county, our region in a way to say, I see the vision here and I see the future for these individuals our cost of living is very reasonable in Lucas County, especially, you know, folks coming from other states one of the things we've been working on, too, is with our Toledo public schools. Why should they educate and work and stay here? So we're trying to leverage other alums. I'm an alum of Toledo Public Schools. Why did I choose to stay here? I could go anywhere and work and being able to show that we have some sustainability and retention just within local professionals here.

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Jasen: Wearing both hats of workforce and economic development, what does your day to day look like in your role before and after the partnerships integrated?

Tonia: Yeah, I would say there's a lot that we have changed. I wish I could tell you what my day to day is because I think I know my day to day, but it never pans out that way.

Jasen: Well, said.

Tonia: But, one of the things that we saw, in coming off of, remote services, was very challenging in the workforce. Let's be honest, the design of workforce it's front facing is interfacing. And so when you think about individuals that are seeking what is next for them or for affected laid off workers, that is in emotional component to it as well. So you can't reach those individuals sitting face to face in person and being able to display the empathy behind where they are in their journey and affirming that they have chosen the right path with, seeking out services because they have a human being in front of them. We kind of kept a hybrid approach, it was inviting. We've always invited, we want to see you here at Ohio-Means-Job Lucas County, so that we could sit down with you and craft what's next for you and really presenting ourselves in a way that it doesn't matter where your starting point is, whether you are a dislocated worker or you've never worked a day in your life.

One of the other benefactors here in Lucas County, just a little over three years ago, we worked on a project for quite a while to combine our workforce and our jobs and family services housed in one facility. So we have what's called a Lucas County Shared Services, where individuals can come to receive assistance. Workforce Services, Child Enforcement Services Agency, is housed here with us along with our Early Vote. So, Board of Elections, early vote is here. So that presents an opportunity to expand the traffic. You can come here to early vote and land into workforce services or land into benefits.

Jasen: Tonia, we appreciate your insights on this journey to excellence for Lucas County. As we near the end of our time together, how would you describe the Link-Level Up-Leverage model for success as a Work Ready Community?

Tonia: I just wanted to know with the Work Ready Lucas County Initiative, what we were able to accomplish and we initially certified in 2018 through the two automotive supplier launches, we were able to certify more than 2000 workers and we gained support of 171 employers for certification as a Work Ready Community. Employers that have recommended this as a tool to consider and can attest to this program. And in that, as we sought out to recruit individual tools, we literally touched over 4000 people in the Toledo Lucas County area.

We leveraged our school systems. We took our three schools that were in the district of those two employers. It was the most brilliant thing that I didn't even come up with. I think we did as a community effort, we leveraged what is called the Financial Opportunity Centers, powered by LISC Toledo, and they have a corporation, so their nationally known because we know that

financial literacy is critical to the success of workers that are currently working or those that are seeking work.

We also leverage our neighborhood groups because we know neighborhood groups can bring the people. We touch to our Faith base. We know that they can touch, because these folks are already talking to the community about their challenges in life. And so having those groups work encompass with us was majorly successful. What's great about this is today we have almost 6800 individuals that have been certified and we are very fortunate that we have met our maintaining status August of 2022 and we are more than on track now. We're at 70% of our goals in maintaining again for October of 2024.

Jasen: Congratulations to your team on this well-earned success and thank you for inspiring us on Ready for Work.

Tonia: Thank you so much. It's my pleasure to be with you, and likewise.

Jasen: As we close out Episode 47, the Work Ready Communities team at A-C-T stands ready to assist if you're new to this endeavor and would like to explore the benefits and feasibility. We have over five hundred Work Ready Communities, supported by more than 28-thousand employers, and powered by the WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate, over 5 million strong and growing each month. Check out the resources in our show notes and connect with us to learn more about Work Ready Communities.

Closing with Jingle: Ready for Work is a service from your friends at ACT, a mission-driven non-profit dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Discover more at act.org/readyforworkpodcast. Now, let's get to work!

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