

BUSINESS ADVOCATE

Birmingham-based Big Communications unpacks extensive research to explain how Alabama is uniquely positioned to attract the best talent from the next generation of workers.

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WINNING THE TALENT WARS

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BIG COMMUNICATIONS' RESEARCH AIMS TO ACCELERATE ALABAMA'S HIGH-TECH FUTURE

In the business world, an insane war for talent has been raging as companies scramble to find workers with desperately needed skills sets. A global pandemic has intensified the pain as the remote revolution and the Great Resignation have tilted the playing field in favor of the worker.

For employers across Alabama, these seismic workplace changes represent a fresh set of challenges, as well as robust opportunities for businesses able to harness the revolutionary trends. At the same time, it's also a chance for the state to chart a new course toward a technology-forward future.

"As job candidates migrate to smaller markets where they can make greater impacts, Alabama is uniquely positioned to attract this next-generation talent, reap the rewards of years of infrastructure investment and become an innovation capital of tomorrow's economy," said John Montgomery, founder and CEO of Big Communications in Birmingham.

To explore the evolving mindset of today's workforce, Montgomery mobilized an experienced team at Big to conduct an extensive research project that leveraged the firm's core competencies in strategic talent recruitment and economic/workforce development.

This is familiar ground for Big, which recently created a multi-channel employee-pipeline campaign for AIDT as part



of an effort by the state's primary workforce development agency to assist the fast-growing auto industry. Through another campaign, Big helped the Alabama State Department of Education identify and hire highly qualified teachers under the state's ambitious TEAMS initiative.

For Big, talent recruitment is actually a long-term specialty. More than a decade ago, the firm created the pioneering Go Build Alabama Campaign for the state's construction industry, which urgently needed to develop a new generation of skilled craftsmen.

To add another dimension to its talent recruitment expertise, Big's nationwide research project focused primarily on the attitudes of workers in the most in-demand segment of the modern workplace — technology, information and intelligence professionals. Big's team set out to crack the code on the shifting desires, motivations and expectations of these workers and analyze how employers across Alabama, as well as state leaders, can capitalize on these convention-shattering trends.

"In our exploration of today's recruitment landscape, we identified

an emerging set of values and priorities shared by today's technology, information, and intelligence workers," said Big Communications Director of Strategy Alex Sharkey, who drove the hybrid qualitative/quantitative research project.

The project's extensive findings led Sharkey to coin a term — the "Innovation Pioneer Mindset" — to describe what is motivating these workers.

"This emerging new mindset is marked by an empowered optimism; they are professionally independent, technologically capable, and personally resilient," said Sharkey.

REINVENTION AND ADVENTURE

Big's groundbreaking study of 300 workers in technology, information and intelligence from around the nation yielded surprising insights that have major implications for hiring managers across Alabama, as well as for state leadership seeking to expand high-tech employment. Some broad findings include:

- These "Innovation Pioneer Mindset" workers are eager to reinvigorate their careers and themselves. The study showed that 70% of respondents believed moving to a new city would accelerate a reinvention. In addition, 73% of them favored relocating so they could help shape the future of their industry.
- These workers may be interested in



downshifting their careers, but they are not slowing down. Sharkey says 80% of respondents who migrated to smaller markets made the move because they believed it would provide a better opportunity to satisfy personal ambitions.

- Interestingly, these workers are driven more by adventure than ambition alone. While 61% of those surveyed are seeking an inspirational workplace, an even greater share (81%) is seeking new adventures. For



— they appeal to a newfound sense of autonomy and adventure," Sharkey said.

INNOVATION ADVANTAGES

As competition rages for talent, what does this mean for Alabama and its emerging Innovation Economy?

Even though many states and countless metro areas are competing to lure knowledge-based workers, Montgomery

technology and manufacturing firms to the state, Alabama faces a unique challenge among those vying for talent — an overabundance of opportunity," he said.

The potential for capitalizing on this trend is being supercharged by Governor Kay Ivey's establishment of the Alabama Innovation Commission, which created a new entity, the Alabama Innovation Corporation, to chart a strategic course toward a high-tech future for the state's economy.

Montgomery said the Innovation Corporation's work can leverage the business-friendly policies that have long made Alabama a top state for economic development, along with other key advantages that can drive innovation and fuel industry growth.

As outlined in a Hoover Institution report for the Innovation Commission, these advantages include:

- Alabama has talent-rich technology hubs around Huntsville and Birmingham supporting a range of innovative industries.
- Investments in advanced manufacturing has brought together an array of technical disciplines and connected the region with

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them, the outdoors has become a priority (84%) as they seek new spaces to explore.

"These new opportunity markets do more than simply meet the 'work/life' balance demanded by today's workforce

believes Alabama represents a sweet spot for professionals with the "Innovation Pioneer Mindset."

"Thanks to a richness of resources and years of economic development that have brought a wide array of advanced



innovative businesses from around the world.

- The state's higher education system promotes innovative thinking and produces next-generation talent in our own backyard.
- Alabama enjoys a richness of natural resources that accentuate a high quality-of-life for adventure-seeking candidates considering a move to the state.

COUNTERING MISPERCEPTIONS

Alabama, however, faces obstacles in talent recruitment, including poor overall perceptions of the entire Southern U.S. Big's research, which included connecting with candidates who accepted positions in Alabama, revealed a double-edged sword.

These candidates were initially drawn to Alabama's quality-of-life advantages — lower cost of living, shorter commutes, improved work-life balance, outdoor activities and so on — but feared they would pay a cultural price.

"Candidates questioned if they would find people like them, if their peers and colleagues would share their passions, and if they'd have a community to

call their own," Sharkey said. "This perceived lack of like-mindedness, a fear of being socially stifled or ideologically alone, was a deterrent factor for many considering careers in our state."

As it turns out, many of the candidates who moved to Alabama found a different reality, according to the research. They were impressed by a warm, welcoming attitude that encouraged new connections, along with an openness to new perspectives and a collective "raise all boats" mentality that celebrates success.

In short, these newcomers to Alabama realized they felt more at home here than in the places they left behind.

Montgomery thinks there is an

important lesson to be learned from the research on the "Innovation Pioneer Mindset," both for Alabama employers and state leaders in economic and workforce development.

Attracting and retaining first-rate national and international talent to Alabama will require a focused and unified effort from recruiters, employers and the state to finally counter the persistent negative perceptions, he said.

"Critically, that means we need to work — and work smart — to totally reframe how outsiders view our state," Montgomery said. "Becoming an innovation capital of tomorrow's economy will require us to illustrate that life in Alabama will not be defined by history or politics but rather by a collective warmth and a desire for success that welcomes talented newcomers and fuels their personal and professional passions," Montgomery said. **BA**

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