

HOSTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA UPSTATE

Upstate

TALENT FORUM

THE TALENT IMPERATIVE

BUILDING A FUTURE-READY SOUTHEAST



UPSTATE
University of South Carolina



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pazdan
smith
ARCHITECTURE



Welcome,

On behalf of the University of South Carolina Upstate, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2026 Upstate Talent Forum.

This year's theme, The Talent Imperative: Building a Future-Ready Southeast, speaks to both the urgency of this moment and the opportunity before us. Demographic shifts, emerging technologies, and changing workforce expectations are reshaping how we learn, work, and compete. How we respond will have lasting implications for our economy and for the opportunities available to the people and communities we serve.

The Upstate Talent Forum was founded on a simple idea: no institution, industry, or community can address these challenges alone. What began as a conversation rooted in the Upstate has grown into a broader convening of leaders from across the Southeast and beyond while remaining grounded in the needs and opportunities of our region.

Over the next two days, leaders from business and industry, education, workforce development, government, and community organizations will examine the forces shaping the future of talent, including artificial intelligence, demographic change, education, infrastructure, economic mobility, and the competition for people and investment. The value of this Forum, however, extends beyond the issues we discuss. It lies in what these conversations enable us to accomplish together.

We have already seen what is possible when the right people come together around a shared challenge. Conversations through the Upstate Talent Forum helped inform the development of USC Upstate's Industrial Engineering program by connecting an identified industry need with an academic response. That is the kind of collaboration we want this Forum to continue inspiring: relationships that become partnerships, ideas that lead to action, and action that creates opportunity.

At USC Upstate, this work is central to our mission. As a regional public university, we have a responsibility to prepare students for meaningful careers while contributing to the economic vitality and quality of life of the communities we serve. That requires us to listen to employers, collaborate across sectors, expand pathways to opportunity, and prepare graduates to lead and adapt in a changing world.

I am grateful to our speakers, sponsors, co-conveners, and partners for sharing their leadership and expertise, and I thank each of you for investing your time and perspective in this important work. I encourage you to use these two days to listen, learn, and connect with a new colleague, a new idea, or a potential partner. If we leave with stronger relationships, clearer priorities, and a deeper commitment to working together, we will have taken an important step toward building a future-ready Southeast.

Thank you for joining us. Together, we can expand opportunity, strengthen our communities, and help our students and our region Reach Greater Heights.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Bennie L. Harris".

Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D.
Chancellor
University of South Carolina Upstate

Tuesday, October 13

8:30 a.m.

Opening Remarks

Dr. Bennie Harris, Chancellor, University of South Carolina Upstate

Presenting Sponsor

Chad Cousins, CEO & Principal, McMillan Pazdan Smith

8:50 a.m.

Keynote

Jeff Korzenik, Chief Economist, Fifth Third Bank

9:30 a.m.

Economic & Workforce Development Plenary

The Regional Talent Imperative: Competing for People, Investment, & Growth

Regional leaders examine how demographics, workforce dynamics, quality of place, education and employer needs are reshaping economic development and what a coordinated talent strategy requires.

Breakout Sessions (choose one of three)

10:30 a.m.

Banking & Finance

Capital Meets Talent: Banking and Finance in a Competitive Economy

Explore how banks and financial institutions can strengthen their own talent pipelines while using capital, partnerships and expertise to support business growth, entrepreneurship and regional competitiveness.

10:30 a.m.

Infrastructure

Powering Growth: Infrastructure, Energy, and the Talent Economy

Explore how energy, water, transportation, digital infrastructure and site readiness enable economic growth — and how the region can build the skilled workforce needed to develop, operate and sustain the systems that support it.

10:30 a.m.

Healthcare & Life Sciences

Caring for the Future: Building the Healthcare and Life Sciences Workforce of Tomorrow

Examine how healthcare providers, educators and industry partners can build stronger talent pipelines while responding to population growth, new technologies, changing care models and evolving workforce expectations.

Noon

Lunch Presentation

John Hope Bryant, Founder and Owner, Operation HOPE

1:00 p.m.

Executive Plenary Panel

The Executive Agenda: Leading Through Talent, Technology, and Change

Executives discuss how they are responding to talent pressures, technological change and shifting employee expectations while building organizations where people can perform, grow and stay.

Breakout Sessions (choose one of three)

2:00 p.m.

Hospitality & Tourism

Talent, Tourism, and Quality of Place: Building Communities Where People Want to Be

Explore hospitality and tourism as both a major employment sector and a driver of quality of place, influencing where people choose to live, work, visit and invest—and the region's ability to attract and retain talent.

2:00 p.m.

Advanced Manufacturing & Aerospace

Building What's Next: Advanced Manufacturing, Aerospace, and the Talent Advantage

Examine how employers and educators can build technical, engineering, production and leadership talent while responding to automation, emerging technologies, supply-chain change and global competition.

- 2:00 p.m. **Education**
One Talent Pipeline: Connecting Education, Employers, and Opportunity
 Explore how K-12, higher education, employers and workforce partners can create clearer pathways from career awareness through credentials, degrees, work-based learning and employment.
- 3:00 p.m. **Economic & Workforce Development Plenary**
From Growth to Opportunity: Turning Economic Investment into Talent Mobility
 Explore how skills, credentials, hiring practices, digital learning and workforce systems can convert economic investment into talent mobility, upward mobility and a deeper regional talent pool.
- 4:00 p.m. **Higher Education Plenary**
Higher Education and the Talent Imperative: Leading a Future-Ready Southeast
 Higher education leaders examine how institutions can respond to changing demographics, employer expectations, AI, affordability and new learning models while expanding opportunity and preserving quality.

Wednesday, October 14

- 8:30 a.m. **Opening Remarks**
- 9:00 a.m. **Keynote**
High Impact Mentoring: A Practical Guide to Creating Value in Other People's Lives
 Bert Thornton, Vice Chairman Emeritus, Waffle House
 Sherry Hartnett, Principal Consultant, Hartnett Group
- 10:00 a.m. **Talent Management & Economic Development Plenary**
The Talent Advantage: Aligning People Strategy with Regional Growth
 Talent and economic development leaders examine how employers and regions can attract, develop, engage and retain people as new roles emerge, skill requirements change and the labor market evolves.
- 11:00 a.m. **Technology & Artificial Intelligence Plenary**
Human Potential in an AI Economy: Preparing the Southeast for the Next Era of Talent
 Explore the human side of AI adoption—including the skills, education, leadership and responsible practices needed to prepare people and organizations for continued change.
- Noon **Lunch Presentation**
 Laura Ullrich, Director of Economic Research in North America, Indeed Hiring Lab
- 1:30 p.m. **Student Conversations with the C-Suite in Azalea A & B**
A Signature Professional Networking Experience
 USC Upstate students will engage in small-group conversations with executive leaders from a variety of industries. The experience emphasizes networking, mentorship and career exploration, giving students an opportunity to gain career insights, ask questions and build confidence connecting with senior leaders.

Co-Conveners



Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D.
Chancellor
USC Upstate



Allen Smith
President & CEO
OneSpartanburg, Inc.



Carlos Phillips
President & CEO
Greenville Chamber
of Commerce



Katie Collins
President & CEO
Greater Greer Chamber
of Commerce

Guest Speakers



Jeff Korzenik
Chief Economist
Fifth Third Bank



John Hope Bryant
Founder, Chairman & CEO
Operation HOPE



Laura Ullrich
Director of Economic
Research in North America
Indeed Hiring Lab



Sherry Hartnett, Ph.D.
Principal Consultant
Hartnett Group



Bert Thornton
Vice Chairman Emeritus
Waffle House

A Note of Appreciation

As we gather for the Fourth Annual Upstate Talent Forum, thank you for your partnership and commitment to advancing talent development and economic opportunity across our region.

This year's theme, The Talent Imperative: Building a Future-Ready Southeast, reflects the importance of collaboration as leaders across sectors work together to strengthen our talent pipeline, expand opportunity, and support long-term regional prosperity.

I am grateful to our co-conveners, speakers, moderators, sponsors, and planning partners whose leadership and support have made this Forum possible. I especially recognize Barbara Fowler for her exceptional contributions to the planning and execution of this event, along with the volunteers, university staff, and partners whose work behind the scenes brings the Forum to life.

Thank you for joining us. I hope these two days strengthen relationships, spark new partnerships, and inspire collaboration that continues well beyond the Forum.



Chris Taylor
Vice Chancellor for
External Affairs
and Chief of Staff



2026 Speaker Roster

The Talent Imperative: Building a Future-Ready Southeast
October 13–14, 2026 | Spartanburg, South Carolina

Tuesday, October 13

8:50 a.m. National Keynote

Jeff Korzenik | Chief Economist, Fifth Third Bank

9:30 a.m. Economic & Workforce Development Plenary

The Regional Talent Imperative: Competing for People, Investment, and Growth

John Lummus | President & CEO, Upstate SC Alliance | Moderator
Carlos Phillips | President & CEO, Greenville Chamber of Commerce
Allen Smith | President & CEO, OneSpartanburg, Inc.
Katie Collins | President & CEO, Greater Greer Chamber of Commerce
Sam Konduros | President & CEO, Greenville City Economic Development Corporation

Breakout Sessions (choose one of three)

10:30 a.m. Banking & Finance Breakout Session

Capital Meets Talent: Banking and Finance in a Competitive Economy

Michelle Seaver | President, United Community Bank | Moderator
Brad Ledford | Managing Director & National Service Line Leader, Talent Services, Forvis Mazars
Marcel Summermatter | SVP, Regional Vice President, Commercial Banking, TD Bank
Jason Pritchard | Partner, GreerWalker

10:30 a.m. Infrastructure Breakout Session

Powering Growth: Infrastructure, Energy, and the Talent Economy

Don Bent | Executive in Residence and Professor of Practice, USC Upstate | Moderator
Rebecca F. West | Chief Executive Officer, Renewable Water Resources (ReWa)

10:30 a.m. Healthcare & Life Sciences Breakout Session

Caring for the Future: Building the Healthcare and Life Sciences Workforce of Tomorrow

Erin Ford | Executive Vice President & COO, SCbio | Moderator
Marlon Hunter | President & CEO, ReGenesis Health Care
Kevin Matson | President, Spartanburg Medical Center, Spartanburg Regional Health System

12:00 p.m. Lunch Presentation

John Hope Bryant | Founder and Owner, Operation HOPE

1:00 p.m. Executive Plenary Panel

The Executive Agenda: Leading Through Talent, Technology, and Change

Kara Bloomberg | President, Landrum | Moderator
Bethany Greene | Regional Economist, Charlotte Branch, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond
Tim Brookshire | Prisma Health
Hannah Carmical | General Manager, Fluor Corporation
Tony Gentry | Human Resources Director, JTEKT North America

Breakout Sessions (choose one of three)

2:00 p.m. Hospitality & Tourism Breakout Session

Talent, Tourism, and Quality of Place: Building Communities Where People Want to Be

Crystal Hendrickson | Pinnacle Partnerships | Moderator
Passion Graham | Founder + CEO, Passionate Productions
Ryan Sanderson | CEO, Knowledge Perk Coffee

2:00 p.m. Advanced Manufacturing & Aerospace Breakout Session

Building What's Next: Advanced Manufacturing, Aerospace, and the Talent Advantage

Jim Howe | Corporate Vice President, Landrum Workforce Solutions | Moderator
Mark Scott | Vice President, Human Resources, Birdon America, Inc.
Trent McJunkin | Project Engineering Manager, Isuzu North America
Kevin Howell | President & CEO, GSP International Airport
Shannon Williams | Senior Director, Florida Business, Leonardo Helicopters USA

2:00 p.m. Education Breakout Session

One Talent Pipeline: Connecting Education, Employers, and Opportunity

Dr. Russell Booker | CEO, Spartanburg Academic Movement | Moderator
Ron Garner | Chief Talent Officer, OneSpartanburg, Inc.
Cheryl Garrison | Executive Director, Greenville Chamber Foundation &
VP of Talent, Education & Leadership, Greenville Chamber
Jona Rowold | Director, Consulting Services, German American Chamber of Commerce South
Paul Sinanian | Department Manager, Talent Programs, Training, BMW Manufacturing Co.

3:00 p.m. Economic & Workforce Development Plenary

From Growth to Opportunity: Turning Economic Investment into Talent Mobility

Matt Sigelman | President, The Burning Glass Institute | Moderator
Dr. Laura Demarse | Vice President for Future of Work, Charles Koch Foundation
Anne Trumbore | Chief Digital Learning Officer, The Sands Institute, UVA Darden School of Business

4:00 p.m. Higher Education Plenary

Higher Education and the Talent Imperative: Leading a Future-Ready Southeast

Dr. Bennie L. Harris | Chancellor, University of South Carolina Upstate | Moderator
Dr. Stephen Pruitt | President, SACSCOC
Dr. Jeffrey Perez | President & Executive Director, S.C. Commission on Higher Education
Dr. Craig Wilson | Chancellor, Palmetto College

Wednesday, October 14

9:00 a.m. Keynote Presentation

High Impact Mentoring: A Practical Guide to Creating Value in Other People's Lives

Bert Thornton | Vice Chairman Emeritus, Waffle House
Dr. Sherry Hartnett | Principal Consultant, Hartnett Group LLC

10:00 a.m. Talent Management & Economic Development Plenary

The Talent Advantage: Aligning People Strategy with Regional Growth

Kelly Dawsey | Chief People Officer, GSP International Airport | Moderator
Rick Harris | RL Enterprise Recruiting and Staffing
Ray Lattimore | Founder, President & CEO, Marketplace Professional Staffing

11:00 a.m. Technology & Artificial Intelligence Plenary

Human Potential in an AI Economy: Preparing the Southeast for the Next Era of Talent

Chad Cousins | CEO & Principal, McMillan Pazdan Smith | Moderator
Dr. Larry Miller | President, Greenville Technical College
Matt Massey | President, Alabama School of Cyber Technology and Engineering
Jim Wanner | Retired CEO, KeyMark; Chairman, Tri-County Technical College Commission
Dr. Bryan Cox | Research Associate II, Constellations Center for Education in Computing, Georgia Tech

12:00 p.m. Lunch Presentation

Laura Dawson Ullrich | Director of Economic Research, Indeed Hiring Lab

1:30 p.m. Student Conversations with the C-Suite at 1:30pm in Azalea A & B.

Thank You To Our Sponsors

