TALENT TALK: FUTURE OF WORK AND PEOPLE-FIRST DESIGN

By Emily Barnwell

The future of work is already unfolding in the Wichita region. The Partnership's Talent Team, in collaboration with Wichita State University (WSU) and the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, hosted the third and final Talent Talk of 2025 on Nov. 3.

The event was an inspiring conversation about innovation, collaboration and what it means to design workplaces around people.

Held at WSU's National Institute for Aviation Research (NIAR) Advanced Technologies Lab for Aerospace Systems (ATLAS) facility, the Talent Talk brought together leaders from industry, education and workforce development to discuss how technology and culture can work together to create stronger, more adaptable organizations.



Air Capital and Manufacturing Capital of the World

Partnership President Jeff Fluhr opened the event by welcoming attendees and recognizing the Talent Team's strategic work to bring the Talent Talk series to life. He then introduced Dr. John Tomblin, Executive Director of NIAR and Executive Vice President for Industry and Defense Programs at WSU.

Dr. Tomblin emphasized Wichita's legacy and responsibility as the Air Capital of the World, noting the region's manufacturing strengths continue to define its future.

"We are the Air Capital of the World because we are the manufacturing capital of the world. We can produce things that no one in the world can. We produce parts that defy gravity," Tomblin said. "It's a call to arms to push manufacturing forward or risk being bypassed. ATLAS was created to help us make that leap."

The ATLAS facility is one of NIAR's most advanced environments for applied research. It's where students, engineers and global industry partners work side by side on next-generation manufacturing, materials and digital transformation projects.

He explained that ATLAS, soon to be joined by the Hub for Advanced Manufacturing Research (HAMR), the world's largest additive manufacturing research center set to open in December, is helping meet new demands from the aerospace and defense sector.

"Wichita has the chance to lead the nation in readiness and manufacturing. As new companies emerge and global demand

grows, we want them to build their businesses in Wichita," he said.



A People-First Philosophy

Marc Perberschlager, General Manager of FILL USA, shared how the Austria-based company's "people-first" philosophy drives success across its global operations, including its growing presence in Wichita.

Founded in 1966 and home to 1,000 employees, FILL designs advanced automation systems for the aerospace, automotive, sports, wood and construction industries. The company has partnered with Fiber Dynamics, Inc. and NIAR to expand composite manufacturing in the United States. Business leaders came alongside the Partnership at the 2025 Paris Air Show, further demonstrating their commitment to U.S. production and global competitiveness.

Perberschlager highlighted what sets FILL apart from its competitors, emphasizing the company's culture of collaboration and lifelong learning.

FILL's "We Are One" motto comes to life through programs such as FILL Your Future and the FILL Future Lab, which engage children, families and professionals with technology and hands-on learning at every stage of life.



Collaboration Driving the Future of Work

A panel moderated by Amanda Duncan, Vice President of the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, expanded on how

automation and innovation are evolving and what employers and educators must do to prepare the workforce for the future.

Panelists included:

- Brennen Shelton, Fiber Dynamics, Inc.
- Nolan Strall, FILL USA
- Dr. Sheree Utash, WSU Tech
- Sheryl Wohlford, Automation-Plus, Inc.

Key Takeaways:

- **Automation is an enabler, not an eliminator.** Technology is creating new opportunities rather than replacing people. The challenge and opportunity are in preparing workers to adapt and engage with evolving tools and processes.
- **Soft skills matter as much as technical skills.** Communication, teamwork and adaptability are essential traits for long-term success.
- **Lifelong learning fuels adaptability.** Manufacturing is accelerating rapidly. The workforce must be flexible and lifelong learners.
- **Education must evolve at the speed of industry.** It's vital to build system thinkers, not just machine operators. Education should create flexible, stackable credential pathways. "The currency of education is changing," said Dr. Utash. "If curriculum is the map, industry is the GPS."
- **Partnerships are Wichita's competitive advantage.** Collaboration among government, education and industry is the "secret sauce" to maintaining Wichita's leadership in manufacturing and innovation.
- **Employers must engage directly with educators.** Businesses need to share real-time workforce needs and partner on skill development, ensuring students are ready for both today's and tomorrow's opportunities.

Wichita is the Center of Innovation

Strall closed the event by thanking NIAR, WSU, WSU Tech and the Partnership for their leadership in fostering collaboration across education and industry.

He shared a personal story about joining FILL as its first U.S. employee and facing the challenge of finding a location that mirrored the company's headquarters in Austria.

"I said Wichita, Kansas," Strall recalled. "My CEO told me, 'You can't be serious.' But when he toured the WSU Innovation Campus, WSU Tech and ATLAS, he walked out and said, 'I was wrong. I didn't think something like this existed in the U.S. anymore.'"

Strall emphasized that Wichita's world-class facilities, talent and work ethic are drawing global attention.

"It's on us to engage more international companies and bring them to the U.S.," he said. "FILL is just the beginning. There is a lot more good to be done."



This was the third and final Talent Talk of 2025. The Partnership hosted four Talent Talks in 2024. They are the direct result of the team's Talent Workshops in 2023. Each event is guided by the Talent Roadmap and meant to help tighten the feedback loop between industry and education.