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Panel Discusses How To Maximize Current And Future Opportunities For Personal and Business Development at Governor's Workforce Development Summit

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Janeke Simon **October 11, 2023**

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Dept. of Labor employees at the 2023 Governor's Workforce Development Summit. By. BRIA JAMES/VI CONSORTIUM

The 2023 Governor's Workforce Development Summit, which began with [great enthusiasm and energy](#) on Tuesday, aimed to "bring all the players to the table" according to Workforce Development Board Chair Michael Carty. The event, which convened employers, job seekers and government agencies, would aid attendees "help, collaborate and redefine what we say is success," Mr. Carty said.

During the first panel - the governor's session - discussions turned to the opportunities that are opening up in other parts of the region, and how the territory, which Mr. Bryan called "very parochial," could participate. Panelist Dr. David Hall, president of the University of the Virgin Islands, noted that regional expansion and collaboration is already on the university's agenda. That goal has borne fruit with a UVI campus in St. Maarten, along with memoranda of understanding "with just about every Eastern Caribbean government," Mr. Hall made known.

Both the governor and the university president acknowledged the strategic value the Virgin Islands has to the United States in terms of developing stronger foreign relations with the other nations in the region. Even opportunities with the fellow United States territory right next door were going unclaimed, Governor Bryan emphasized. "Puerto Rico has three million people, and yet we sell them nothing," he said. "Why aren't we capitalizing on that project?"

The governor noted that the free trade zone established on St. Croix means that goods imported would not attract tariffs, and neither would finished goods sent to the mainland – a potential boon for regional manufacturers who currently face significant challenges establishing a foothold in the U.S. market due to the tariffs and taxes on foreign-made goods. "These are simple things that we're not leveraging," Mr. Bryan stated.

However, with the territory currently technically at full employment, the question soon arose as to who exactly would be available to fill the jobs that would be created if existing and future opportunities are fully leveraged. Once again, the governor pointed to immigration — [both documented and undocumented](#). "We need the immigrant population," Mr. Bryan said, echoing past statements. "We need new people to participate in our economy." Noting the recent student strike for more comfortable conditions conducive to learning, the governor argued that a large percentage of young Virgin Islanders would not be interested in some of the more physically challenging work involved in the construction industry.

Panelist Keith O'Neale Jr of O'Neale's Transport responded by recounting a recent job fair at which he hired five people. Attrition during the training period led to only one of the initial batch showing up for the first day on the job. "If they have the slightest indication that this is not what I want to do, I'm bouncing," Mr. O'Neale lamented.

That sparked a conversation about employee satisfaction and the work that businesses need to do to retain a new generation of workers with higher expectations for their work environment.

Ultimately, panelists agreed that change was the one constant factor in the discussion, and that everybody – employees and employers alike – needed to adapt to the changing world of work. Governor Bryan noted that the territory would need to continue adapting to ongoing changes in the global economic landscape. "As much as we are begging people to work today, there will be a recession some time in the future, where nobody will be looking for people to work," he reminded. "The world is circular, everything's come back."

That is why Virgin Islanders need to ensure that they stay competitive – as individuals in the job market, as businesses chasing profits, and as a territory as a whole. At the beginning of the day's session, Mr. Carty posed the question aptly. "We have more opportunity now than we had in the past 50 years, he said. "But we need to decide – how are we going to approach it?"