

# Talent access tops list of business challenges in Fox Cities survey

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A recent survey of Appleton-area companies found access to talent was far and away the biggest challenge associated with doing business in the region.

The Fox Cities Chamber recently released the results of its 2026 Economic Outlook Survey, which revealed the business community in the northeastern Wisconsin region is “cautiously optimistic” about what this year will bring.

“Businesses are growing steadily, believe in the region, and see the Fox Cities as a competitive place to operate,” authors wrote. “The defining challenges — and opportunities — center on talent: attracting people, housing them affordably, preparing them for local jobs, and helping employers adapt to new technologies.”

About 45% of respondents pointed to talent as their top hurdle to business success, while no other concern topped 20%. Those included the cost of doing business, market proximity, work ethic, housing and local infrastructure.

When asked to compare their performance in 2025 compared to the prior year, 55% of respondents said they had higher revenue, while 25% said revenue was unchanged over the year and 19% said it was lower.

The breakdown was similar for a question on profits, with 49% seeing improvement between 2024 and 2025, 28% seeing no change and 23% seeing a decline in profits over the year.

For employment, 38% saw an increase while 52% had no change over the year and 11% saw a decline. And for capital investment, 37% had an increase while 49% saw no change and 15% had a decrease.

Looking ahead to the rest of this year, respondents were slightly more optimistic about prospects for revenue and profits.

Fifty-six percent said they expect revenues in 2026 to exceed last year, while 36% expect them to hold steady and just 8% are projecting a decline. At the same time,

50% expect to see higher profits while 40% expect no change and 10% project lower profits this year.

Meanwhile, 35% expect to have more employees this year than last year, 59% expect to have the same number and 7% expect to have fewer workers. For capital investment in 2026, 30% expect it to rise from last year's total, 52% expect no change and 18% project a lower level.

Another question asked respondents about their primary growth strategy for the next 12 months, revealing 40% plan to grow existing markets, 16% plan to enter new markets and 12% plan to boost productivity, while 7% plan to grow their margins and 7% plan to strengthen management.

Respondents' views on the economic vitality of the Fox Cities seem to be improving, with the share of those saying it's good or excellent rising from about 70% in 2021 to just above 80% in the latest survey.

The survey was conducted in December and January using the online platform SurveyMonkey, a chamber spokesperson said. It was distributed and administered by the Fox Cities Chamber Regional Partnership, including 109 businesses and organizations located in Outagamie, Calumet and northern Winnebago counties.

See the [full results](#) and [release](#).