

# Company sees employment from many angles

By JENNIFER OLADIPO  
contributor

It's one thing to find the right person for a job, but another to try and shape the pool from which that person is recruited. Having handled various aspects of the human resources business since 1968, Phillips Staffing believes today it is crucial that employers and communities figure out how to do both.

Last week, Phillips Staffing employees were unpacking boxes at the Clemson at the Falls building that overlooks Falls Park.

The team was excited about what was for them a sort of homecoming: Phillips Staffing has moved to downtown Greenville after 19 years at a Pelham Road location. But the agency's main concern is the future of employment in this region.

Ed Parris, president, said the field has changed significantly since he began working in economic development decades ago.

"Thirty years ago (South Carolina) was selling cheap labor," Parris said. "You can't sell that anymore. You don't want to sell that." Instead, he said maintaining a skilled workforce has become a highly critical issue when courting business to the area.

"It's becoming a big part of economic development. How many certified people do you have in this part of South Carolina? What's your labor market? Those are the first questions

you're going to get."

In response, Phillips Staffing takes a multifaceted approach to the work of connecting people with jobs. Its first focus: ensuring that local workers can do the technical jobs that are in increasing demand.

Blanton Phillips, chairman and son of founder Sam Phillips, said one of the most valuable tools they use to address the skills gap plaguing South Carolina is the ACT WorkKeys skills assessment tool – a national career readiness certificate from the same company that does the ACT college readiness assessments.

South Carolina was one of five pilot states in which the assessment tool was tested on two-year college students. Blanton Phillips said the certificate is becoming

preferred to a high school diploma, making it easier for companies anywhere to know that the local workforce has exactly the skills they need. It also provides more detailed and standardized

a component of WorkKeys that allows for training and certification. With it, workers can access computer-based training if they do not yet have the skills for the jobs they want.

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Ed Parris, president of Phillips Staffing

information about a potential employee's skills.

He said this has been especially helpful for military veterans, who can find it difficult to communicate how their experience fits into a corporate setting. South Carolina also purchased

At Phillips Staffing, a detailed assessment of workers goes hand-in-hand with an assessment of the work. That is where Beverly Deal stands out as the team's workforce readiness director. She is one of just 18 of South Carolina's certified "profilers," people who use WorkKeys to assess a job down to its last detail. That means, for instance, spending an entire shift standing next to the lead operator at a chemical plant, watching and noting every detail of the job. Afterward, she spent a couple of days writing a 100-page report on what it takes to do that job.

A second important part of Phillips' work is a regional approach to recruiting that matches the now-standard regional approach to economic development, said Parris. The company has 12 offices in cities including Spartanburg, Aiken, Lancaster,

Gaffney, Charlotte and Lenoir, Ga. The challenge is no longer about getting a company to come to a certain town, but about also making sure the region as a whole is attractive to competitive business. Looking at a larger picture also helps prospects stay aware of changes in the market, said Parris.

Agency officials agree the new downtown office is one way to keep a finger on the pulse of change in the Upstate. The company had connections with Clemson College of Business through job fairs, and its board already held meetings at the location.

The surrounding landscape has changed dramatically since Sam Phillips moved the company from a spare bedroom at his home to the former Woodside Building on Main Street, but Blanton Phillips still considers this a small community. He said he takes personal pride and responsibility in seeing companies take root and create jobs for the locals he promised were ready for them.

"I tell people all the time, I'm going to run into you on the street. I don't ever want to hear you say, 'You misled me,'" he said. He and Parris maintain that South Carolina has a great story to tell: their focus on workforce development is an effort to make sure that story stays true.

Contact Jennifer Oladipo at [joladipo@greenvillejournal.com](mailto:joladipo@greenvillejournal.com).



President Ed Parris, left, and CEO Blanton Phillips at Phillips Staffing's new downtown location in the former Bowater building next to Falls Park. The building is also home to Clemson at the Falls.

GREG BECKNER / STAFF