

BUSINESS

Miami-Dade needs more talented workers. Here's its plan to bring them here — and keep them.

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Developer Nitin Motwani stands in front of a Miami Worldcenter scale model at Paramount Miami sales center in Miami on Aug. 1, 2019. ALEXIA FODERE FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Nitin Motwani, managing principal of Miami Worldcenter, Downtown Development Authority board member, and board chair of the University of Miami's real estate program, has a lot on his plate. The same goes for Sheldon Anderson — board member of the Miami Dade College Foundation, board member at Northern Trust Corp., and board member of the Miami-Dade Beacon Council.

But in their new capacity as co-chairs of the Miami-Dade Beacon Council's One Community, One Goal initiative, they have one thing on their mind:

"Miami must do more to attract, retain, and grow talent," Motwani, a South Florida native, said recently from his offices outside the towering Worldcenter development downtown. "If you take a job that doesn't work out, will you have other options?"

Anderson is on the same page.

"When they're looking to come to South Florida, the first thing a company wants to know is, 'Where's the talent.' We need to be able to answer that effectively."

The Beacon Council launched the One Community, One Goal initiative in 2011 to diversify the South Florida economy and grow jobs in key industries — a campaign intended also to boost salaries.

Motwani and Anderson are bringing a new strategy: put the region on the national and international map as a place known for a high-quality workforce where companies easily find the employees they need.

Their job may not be simple.

In its most recent survey of tech talent, which includes individuals with degrees in computer science, engineering, and math, real estate firm CBRE ranked Miami 48th out of 50 U.S. cities, with a score of 22.16 out of 100.

The regional outlook is brighter. When Miami's score is combined with Fort Lauderdale's, the rating rises to 53.13. And that brings South Florida to 15th nationally.

That's how Motwani sees it: While Miami is the name most easily recognized, South Florida's companies and workers cross geographic boundaries all the time. And that could increase, thanks to the launch of Virgin Trains, formerly known as Brightline.

"For the first time, we've connected the tri-county area, meaning 7 million people," Motwani said. "That puts us closer to [the] Dallas and Houston metro areas, whereas historically Miami was always competing against Miami Beach or Doral."

[Last year's Amazon HQ2 pitch](#) was South Florida's highest-profile effort working as a "mega-region."

"Mega-regions are the future," Motwani said. "For housing, education, people's interests — I'm a big believer in that, and I think the train allows us to think in that way."

Virgin is part of a larger transportation pitch Motwani says can lure talent here. He is convinced area residents too easily dismiss the plethora of transit options available. Once Tri-Rail connects to downtown — although when that will happen remains unclear — the criticism of Miami as car-only becomes outdated, he said.

He knows "mega-region" is a message that can work, because it resonated with Amazon.

"We've got 10-plus million people [a year] taking Metromover," he said. "We've got 20 million a year taking Metrorail. We've got Brightline now connecting the tri-county [region]. ... Tri-Rail is now coming into downtown connecting all 28 or so cities in the tri-county area. I think [Amazon] was impressed by that story. Even locally, because people don't quite grasp what that means."

Another undervalued community asset, said Anderson, is education. “We can highlight that we have phenomenal institutions of higher learning, important research universities here,” he said.

While education is strong, too many graduates are leaving the area because of limited opportunities, he said.

“We really need to have people understand that if they want a career, they don’t have to leave town to do it,” Anderson said.

To broaden job options, One Community, One Goal will again bring together local industry leaders and educators to evaluate business needs.

Tech is now the priority, according to Beacon Council President and CEO Mike Finney. Inclusion is especially important, he said, so that under-represented communities are not left behind.

“It’s just vitally important that we have more [tech] talent available,” he said. “But we have to pay attention to both ends — how to help individuals who are economically challenged, all the way up to the knowledge base.”

Motwani believes a large tech company like Chewy or eBuilder could have the same effect that Groupon, the group deals company, had in Chicago, where it created hundreds of well-paying jobs virtually overnight.

“One company totally transformed the environment,” Motwani said.

Kaseya, a fast-growing software management company with more than 130 employees locally, could be such a company, according to Finney. Last week, [Kaseya announced a \\$500 million investment](#).

Startup investment firm Softbank, which has opened a beachhead office in Miami for Latin American investments, could have a similar effect if it expands, he said.

Motwani also pointed out that an increasing number of tech founders are moving to South Florida.

“These are alpha achievers who are used to growing businesses, and they [would be] starting their next business down here,” he said.

Motwani’s and Anderson’s next steps will involve a listening tour of key business stakeholders. Their findings will then be shared with local academic institutions to better tailor curricula toward community needs.

Said Anderson, “We want them to tell us what they need, what resources they need, the talent they need, so we can speak to academic leaders to say, ‘here are the opportunities; what curriculum can you form to ensure that when an employer needs talent that we can provide it right here in this community.’”

“You need to try a lot of different things,” Motwani said. “There’s no obvious answer. The world is changing.”