Baker infuses innovation and creativity into human resource strategy. Baker was nominated by his peers to be the 2011 president of the Society for Human Resource Management in Memphis (SHRM), which is one of the largest SHRM Chapters in the U.S. Baker is the president of HRO Partners—a human resource consulting and outsourcing firm. His personal specialty is in leadership development and employee benefit strategies. Benefit brokers and CPAs turn to HRO Partners to help their clients with benefit administration and enrollment, health care reform and cost containment strategies. Baker has served as the chairman of the board for the Small Business Chamber.

Barnett is employed by Southwest Tennessee Community College as a Corporate Training Specialist and Manager of the Industrial Readiness Training Program. Prior to joining Southwest in 2012, he was employed by FedEx as a senior manager for the Memphis World Hub and also spent 12 years in Retail Management and Operations as a buyer, merchandise and Operations Manager. Barnett is a Life Member of the University of Memphis National Alumni Association and currently serves as president of the National Alumni Association board of directors and a member of the University President’s Board of Visitors.

Harris owns Prestigious Placement. He is a graduate of the University of Memphis, after which time he became a 9th grade English teacher for Whitehaven High School. In 2005, Harris won the City of Memphis Peace Achiever award from Mayors Willie Herenton and A C Wharton for educating Memphis residents on proper communication and behavior for the American workforce. Harris also owns Prestigious Carrier Inc., which has pulled freight for Wal-Mart since 1991. Prestigious Carrier was awarded a Lifetime Achievement award by Wal-Mart in 2004 for excellence in providing labor and logistics services.

Woods is the executive director of Workforce Investment Network, an organization that assists Memphis, Shelby County and Fayette County with improving employment opportunities for its citizens. He previously served as the director of Career Development with New Horizons and is the two-time recipient of The President’s Club.

Woods currently serves on the Shelby County School Board as vice chair and is a member of numerous boards, including BRIDGES board of trustees, PeopleFirst, REACH Memphis, and the TN Achieves Advisory Council. He’s a graduate of Leadership Memphis, Executive Class of 2014, and recognized in the Memphis Business Journal’s “Top 40 Under 40.”
Building a better workforce in Memphis

Austin Baker: How would you describe your organization and what it does?

Kim Barnett: Through our academic programs, Southwest Tennessee Community College (STCC) is positioned to assist with the corporate training and workforce development needs of people who lack (require, desire or are seeking) certain skill sets. We offer many training programs for technical certificates and degrees. We also partner with local companies to learn their workforce needs and train our students accordingly, so we are able to provide companies the employees they need for specific roles. We also work with companies moving to Memphis to supply them trained employees. When our students graduate, we have partnering companies that are ready to hire them. We also offer hands-on-training through our company partnerships. For example, we have 12-week certification program in which an employee from industry can get specific skills training. Upon completion of the program, the student has the opportunity to work for the company based on the specific training they received. What we really enjoy working with companies like this and welcome the opportunity to work with more companies in the same manner.

Neil Harris: Prestigious Placement is a career agency. As a former high school English teacher, I noticed that a lot of the info that builds value in students for career success was not being taught in the curriculum. When students didn’t see the value in information they were learning, they didn’t retain it. I decided that they overwhelmingly valued sports and entertainment. I realized that they valued the industries because the people who were really good were treated like stars and they had agents, and the agent invested in them to help them get to where they are simply because the agent saw the value in the person’s potential. My first and oldest company I own is Prestigious Career Agency. It has pulled freight for Walmart since 1991. In 2004, I received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Wal-Mart for industry influence and logistics, and it hit me: My purpose was for me to become a career agent that is drafting kids out of high school and building them a career in logistics. I’ve decided to make education and logistics just as valuable as sports and entertainment. I invest in them just like a sports agent would, teach our stars things that perhaps they weren’t allowed to learn otherwise or didn’t have the opportunity to learn. By doing so, we help our people find their purpose and we instill principles that make them more valuable to all of our corporate partners. We train our people according to the company’s SOP manual as needed. We are offering to lower-income people what’s been offered to higher-income people for years now – an agent. As agents, we believe in our clients and invest in them.

Kevin Woods: Workforce Investment Network (WIN) is the connector of people and companies. As the local workforce development board for Shelby and Fayette Counties, we serve as the intermediary for workforce activities. We work with those who are seeking employment opportunities to companies looking to build a talented workforce. Our goal is to ensure we have strong funding streams to support our industries in building the best workforce possible.

Baker: How are you deploying your resources to support the Memphis workforce?

Barnett: One such resource we provide to the community is our Industrial Readiness Training (IRT) program, which began in 2012. It’s a four-and-a-half-week program for unemployed or underemployed people, where we teach soft skills, hard skills, basic machine courses, technical math and blueprint reading. This program was created by Southwest in response to the Memphis Initiative, which is designed to create a pipeline of semi-skilled workers to meet the needs of local manufacturing companies. We’ve graduated more than 1,200 people from that program, with a 70 percent placement rate with local companies. Southwest’s goal is to meet companies where their needs are currently and to exceed them, whenever possible, to assist with future growth and sustainability. When companies come to us, we need to know to provide candidates who possess four major qualities: they must be reliable – show up for work and be on time; team players – get along with colleagues; be trainable – have the ability and willingness to aid in the company’s mission; and be productive.

Harris: We provide support for our clients’ whole life; and in order to guide them properly, we need to know where they came from. Just as the civil rights movement was about providing support, we support them and help them find their purpose. We tell them it’s not about what race they are or their background, we want them to see what their next step is by looking forward. And, we provide support in other ways, as well. If transportation is an issue for someone, we’ll send an Uber car (the cost of which gets deducted from their next paycheck). If they have bad credit, we have our Credit Repair Department help them, if they have tattoos or drug scars, we help improve their appearance ... all in an effort to support the whole life of our stars.

Woods: As the local workforce board, we partner with the Tennessee Department of Labor & Workforce Development to operate Career Centers or one-stop shops. There are three locations in Shelby County and one in Fayette. These job centers will serve thousands of job-seekers in their search for better opportunities. They are also the hubs for our business partners to host career events. By developing a business services team out in the community to engage the business, we are able to help them identify what their workforce needs are and then bring that information back to our training providers. This model allows our training to tailor training programs to industry needs. We also invest in our area’s Opportunity Youth, young men and women between ages 16-24 who are neither working nor in school. WIN invests about $3 million a year toward connecting as many young individuals as we can with workforce opportunities.

Baker: What’s one main factor that companies are looking for in the workforce?

Barnett: Companies are concerned about their future and the future of Memphis. They’re strategically looking down the road three to five years and focusing on succession planning as their current workers are getting ready to retire in huge numbers. So, we must quickly push forward on all workforce skills training initiatives and make a job such as a boilermaker, for example, look good to middle and high school students, who must take the place of retirees. We must show students that manufacturing jobs can be career paths to bright futures. Also, companies are still not sure if our training can meet their needs, like welding, for example, a big need currently in Memphis. Southwest must do more to meet the workforce needs of companies, and other educational institutions are also needed to assist in this effort. A company’s biggest hesitation is that we can’t help them be sustainable.

Harris: Critical thinking. Companies say they want our workforce to be able to think critically. Let me explain it this way: Literacy equals complex thoughts, which makes us human. Illiteracy equals instinct. Animals react out of instinct because they have no critical thinking ability. So, if we want humans to have complex thoughts, we have to educate them so they won’t react off instinct by being illiterate. Companies also wonder if the younger generation doesn’t stay with the same company long term. It’s because the workforce doesn’t see their own purpose and contribution to society. At Prestigious, we guide our stars to find their purpose because that purpose will then help them to build spirit and purpose. At Prestigious, we guide our stars to find their purpose because that purpose will then help them to build spirit and purpose.

Baker: More than 18,000 jobs went unfilled in Memphis last year. What other specifics are companies looking for in the workforce?

Woods: Regardless of if I’m speaking with Commissioner Burns Phillips at the Tennessee Department of Labor & Workforce Development or Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland, companies are asking for employees who can be productive early in the employment stage. Employees who understand the importance of time-management conflict resolution and problem-solving skills are in great demand. As the local workforce development, we are well-equipped to help a number of job-seekers who can be identified as job-ready when they show up at work. We are fortunate at Prestigious to work with a number of well-known partners who are making career-readiness training a very high priority.

Barnett: We must aid our clients and students in coming up with decision makers and critical thinkers. That’s a very important piece. We also have to counsel our workforce, provide support and the necessary coping skills.

Baker: Can you provide an example of a success story in Memphis?

Woods: For Southwest, an obvious sign of success is when a company informs us that candidates we have sent to them are meeting or exceeding their expectations. Or when a student emails me and tells me how Southwest has helped them with their career path – and because of Southwest, they’ve been able to move into a position they had no idea they could ever have. I love hearing this kind of feedback from students and companies.

Baker: What’s one thing employers need to know about working with you as a partner, as well as the workforce?

Woods: We offer financial incentives to companies that are hiring. In many cases, we can offer 50 percent to 75 percent of the employer’s wages for the first six months. We’ve also worked with a number of companies taking advantage of these resources. As the local workforce board, we are required to work with our high schools, colleges and industries to identify career pathways. My role as executive director is to introduce these employers to a renewed and energized workforce board committed to helping solve their industry needs.

Harris: We allow companies to “audition” our talent until they find who they want, an understanding of importance because they effectively see how they are needed in the role that they play at their job. Then, critical thinking on the job appears to be a disconnect because someone else’s problem. Life coaches and motivational speakers have typically been used by companies for upper-level jobs to boost morale. At Prestigious, we provide those things to all of our stars regardless of pay grade.
and at the same time, this allows our talent to find their purpose. We've recently been working with TIX Cos., for example, which just went online and is now building a new building. What TIX liked about us is our boutique approach. Companies also need to know that just because you pay employees more, it doesn't mean you're going to get a better employee. What they need to do is show employees an org chart so they can see the next position in the company and the one above that. Of course, an increase in pay will come along, but when the employee also sees how they can grow within the company, they are more engaged in the business by being part of the spirit of the business. Take the company's spirit and wrap it in its brand. And that's part of why we're life coaches for these people — helping them find their passion and purpose through training.

Barnett: We have not had a lot of success making inroads to upper-level management of companies to introduce them to our programs and what we can do. Unfortunately, this information seems to go no further than the frontlines of a company. We must do a better job of making sure that they know what we offer and how we can assist them. This information needs to get to the CEO level and then pushed down throughout the varying levels of the company. We need to help them become more knowledgeable about what's out there — what we are offering, the solutions we provide and that we are ready to provide training and advising to create better employees. Additionally, Southwest Tennessee Community College has received more than $8.4 million in U.S. Department of Labor grants to assist training Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) eligible workers, veterans and others in the fields of advanced manufacturing, process control and logistics management. Southwest received a total of three grants — a single grant and two consortia grants. Receipt of these funds has allowed Southwest to better respond to the critical needs of Memphis, Shelby and Fayette Counties for a trained workforce with industry-recognized credentials, certificates and degrees that will contribute to Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam's Drive to 55 Initiative.

Baker: The State of Tennessee reported that automation could take away 50 percent of the jobs in the marketplace in the coming years — mostly jobs that are less than $20/hour will likely soon be automated. What affect does automation have on the workforce, and what are you doing to prepare people?

Barnett: I think companies will be looking for more certificate programs, which is what Southwest offers, such as certified logistics technician programs. Our National Career Readiness Certification (NCRC) of bronze, silver, gold and platinum certifications is yet another example of what we can offer. Companies are going to want to see that an employee they hire has a certain certification that enables them to do specific tasks, so the company won't have to guess what the person is capable of doing. STCC is developing more training programs for more certifications because that's what companies want — to know they are hiring someone with specific abilities because of their certification and training.

Woods: Our colleges and training providers are gearing up for this shift by offering programs that will give students a competitive advantage. Mechatronics, machine operation and industrial maintenance certifications will help put graduates at the front of the line for employment opportunities in automation.

Baker: Memphis has the largest population of people 18 and younger of students who drop out of school and don't have degrees. What can you do to help youth in grades K-12 to be successful?

Barnett: My concern is with Shelby County Schools possibly cutting Career and Technical Education (CTE) training. We need to do more with middle and high school students. In fact, we are starting an initiative in Fayette County to get career readiness back into the classroom through dual enrollment. What this does is give secondary students exposure to Southwest's technical degree and certificate programs, while getting college-level credit. This allows them to segue into Southwest or another technical school.

Woods: This is a very important question and a subject I'm very passionate about. From the inception of the Hope Scholarship to TN Promise, we have been fortunate to have leadership in Nashville over the years who understands that college enrollment can greatly improve the earning potential of our citizens. There are a number of agencies doing good work to improve outcomes for youth but we must align these efforts. Mark Sturgis, who is with Prestigious Foods, said that automation could take away 50 percent of the jobs in the marketplace in the coming years — mostly jobs that are less than $20/hour will likely soon be automated. What affect does automation have on the workforce, and what are you doing to prepare people?

Austin Baker and Kim Barnett

The Workforce Investment Network (WIN) is a community resource that prepares job seekers for jobs and helps connect them with employment opportunities in Memphis, Shelby and Fayette County.

www.workforceinvestmentnetwork.com

The Workforce Investment Network is a partner of the Tennessee Career Centers. This agency is a recipient of taxpayer funding, and serves the City of Memphis, Shelby County and Fayette County. The Career Center system is an equal opportunity employer. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. TTY: 1-800-441-0299

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hiring directly from employers about their Career Pathway. Many start as package handlers and now are in leadership capacity. Counselors were amazed by their stories. I know this is the story of many employees at companies throughout our region. We also hosted our inaugural high school career fair that attracted more than 100 employers and 1,500 seniors. These are seniors who had expressed interest in joining the workforce after high school. Our local companies are already giving suggestions on how this can be bigger for more companies and more school districts next year. Again, this is yet another area where we play an active role in connecting partners, sharing data and using our resources where they can have the biggest impact.

Harris: As I am a former [public schools] teacher, Prestigious has strong ties to the school system. We draft out of high school but we only provide careers for [those] 18 and older, but I can say from having experience as a school teacher, we need to train youth in spirit. Teach them that their words are their power; that daily affirmations and challenges bring a team together. Words are power because they make thoughts, and we need to teach our youth to move in the direction of positive thoughts. Also, corporations need to take youth to their sites and train them on the equipment in their factories when the youth are fresh out of high school. Companies are confident that their workforce we are training will have the skill set to meet their needs.

Woods: About re-entry — one mistake should not define the rest of a person's life. Many companies are taking chances on our re-entry population not because it's altruistic, but because these men and women are having a positive impact on the company's workforce. We encourage more companies to join in, as well. Another thing: Our young people do want to work. We should expose more of them to employment opportunities. The City of Memphis' Youth Service Office cannot do it alone. With the help of local companies, we can expose more of our youth to a work environment as early as possible. Our student's biggest fear is that they don't know — how can they dream career possibilities that they've never seen?

Harris: Memphis has been labeled as non-effective. So, to be effective, we need to help people find their purpose. Maya Angelou found her purpose from the pain of a tragic assault; she was too afraid to talk about it, so she expressed herself through writing. She found purpose through her pain. Memphis has lots of poverty and crime — that's pain. And Memphis does have a workforce, so we need to train that workforce to find their purpose, which will alleviate the pain.