

Equal and Opposite Attractions

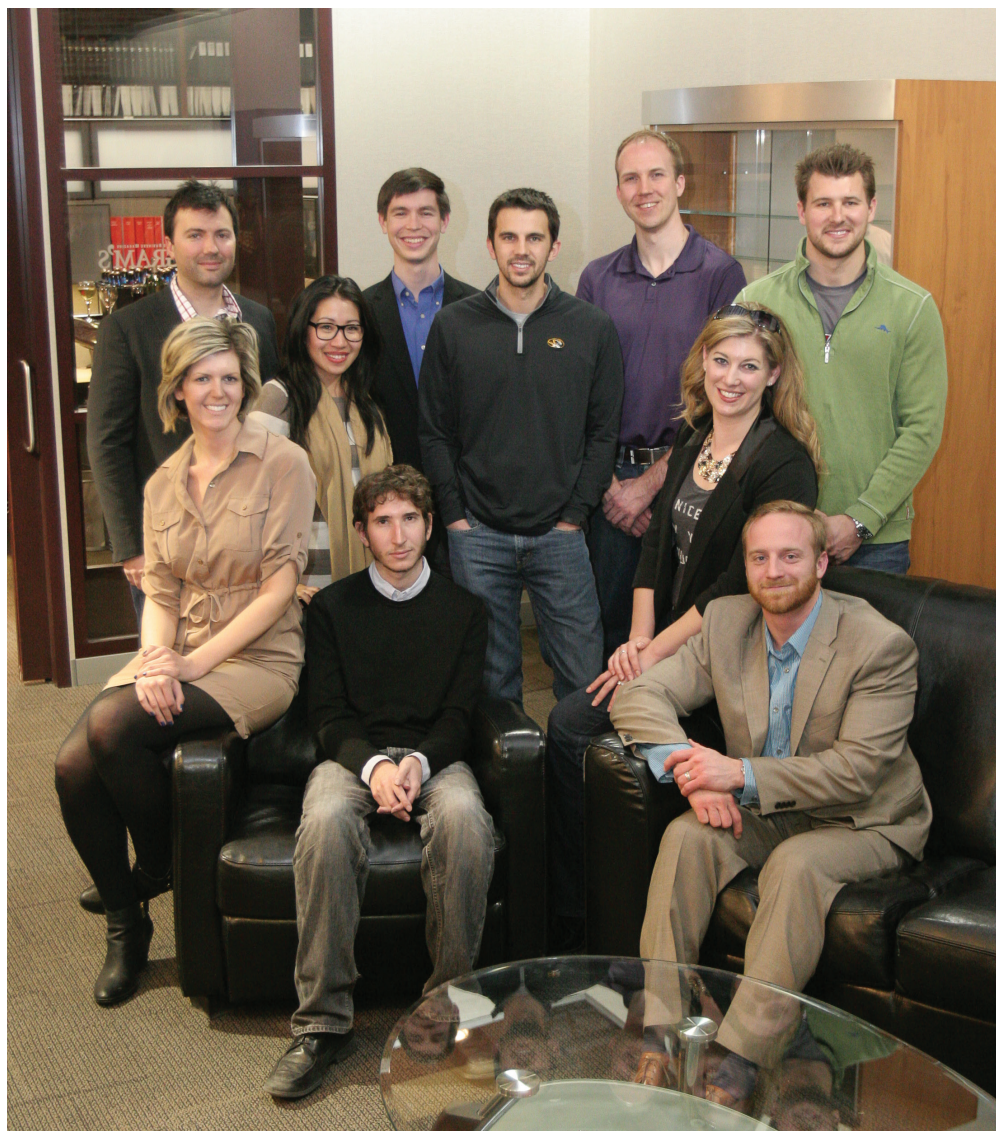
For a career launch pad, you could do a whole lot worse than Kansas City, young professionals say. Taking that to the next level to attract and retain young workers will require a little TLC with workplace dynamics, education and public policy.

(Seated, left to right)

Brooke Beason, Meers Advertising
Jordan Bell-Masterson, Kauffman Foundation
Meagan Flynn-Mesmer, Smart Mouth Productions
Mike McKeen, ePartment Communities

(Standing, left to right)

Drew Gilmore, Keller Williams Realty
Bonyen Lee-Gilmore, KCTV-5
Justin Smith, Shook, Hardy & Bacon
Blake Fulton, MAG Trucks
Kyle Claypool, Global Prairie
Brad Carlson, MAG Trucks



For eons, it seems, civic leaders have talked about ways to ensure that young talent in Kansas City would stay here. The phrase “Brain Drain” was kicked around a lot back in the ’80s. The topic would inspire forums where deep thoughts would be thunk, and proclamations would issue forth about how to keep the hooks in ’em, instead of seeing them off to Chicago, Dallas, or—heaven forfend—the coasts.

Rarely were those deep thinkers born within two or three decades of the youngsters in mind, and many a forum concluded without anyone giving them a seat at the table and asking them what they wanted.

Well, we did. Earlier this month, *Ingram’s* engaged a dozen highly successful young professionals and entrepreneurs to do that very thing: Talk about what drew them here, what keeps them here, and what’s needed to maintain those bonds. What followed, over the course of more than three hours of wide-ranging discussion, was a collective sense that:

- This metropolitan area is way cooler than people here have ever acknowledged—at least to people from other cities.
- We need to improve on that baseline, as well as a number of extraordinary amenities we enjoy here—or, at our own

peril, risk seeing them erode. A once-thriving Kansas City school district comes to mind as but one cautionary tale.

The Good

In a lot of ways, the things worthy of celebration here are connected to broad opportunities to succeed—in business, in family and personal life, in philanthropy.

“The entrepreneurial community here is damn near exploding,” said Blake Miller, whose company, Think Big Partners, has worked with roughly 400 startups and entrepreneurial ventures in just the six years since its own formation.

Kyle Claypool, director of digital media for Global Prairie, cited what he called “incredible energy in the entrepreneurial community,” as well as the benefits of being the first metro area to access Google Fiber’s ultra-high-speed Internet connections.

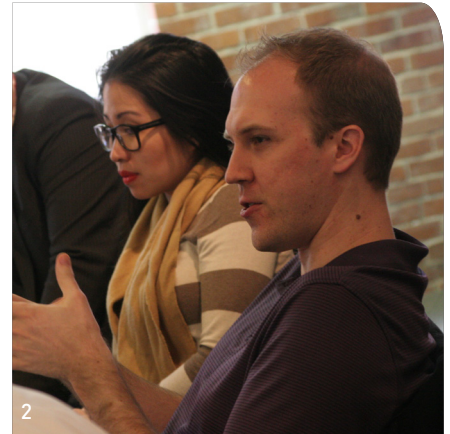
Brad Carlson and Blake Fulton, co-founders and owners of MAG Trucks, also chimed in on the general lack of barriers to entrepreneurial success—even in a sector that doesn’t fit neatly with the trendier start-up ventures. While Carlson noted that the Midwest, by definition, was a natural trucking center, “we’re redneck entrepreneurs,” Fulton said. “You talk life sciences, we talk engines.”

Drew Gilmore, a residential real estate professional, acknowledged two key regional strengths: A family-friendly environment for those raising children, and a real estate market that, compared with coastal areas, has boasted significantly more price stability, even throughout the housing crash that began in 2007.

Meagan Flynn-Mesmer, an actor and producer for Smart Mouth Productions, cited a vibrant—yet underdeveloped—creative community, especially in the video arts. Popular television shows like “Lost,” she said, had drawn on special-effects segments created in Kansas City, demonstrating that top-flight talent is already in place here. What’s needed, she said, is a nurturing of that talent, and tax credits for movie production—as well as city staff dedicated to film opportunities—were two good places to start.

The Bad

KCTV anchor/reporter Bonyen Lee, who’s married to Drew Gilmore, was right up front with her assessment of what’s holding this region back: “Too often,” she said, “we try to be something we’re not.” Her spouse needed but two words to describe the impact of poor policy decisions that still impose consequences on the region today: “The stadiums,” he said. Had Kansas City followed Denver’s model, he believes, rather than build the Truman Sports Complex to the east, Downtown would be far stronger today, and the metro overall stronger as well for having a solid core.



1. Entrepreneurs come in different shades, said Blake Fulton, a self-described Redneck Entrepreneur. | 2. Kyle Claypool believes Kansas City’s entrepreneurial community boasts “an incredible energy.” | 3. Mike McKeen noted that long-term plans for a streetcar system could connect Downtown and the Northland. | 4. Meagan Flynn-Mesmer pointed out the skills of video production companies, saying the ones here did first-class work.

Public transportation—such as it is—came in for frequent criticism, both for the failings of a bus system seemingly designed for a 9-to-5 Downtown commuter who is more mental image than reality, and for the execution of a plan to start a streetcar system with a 2.2-mile line that runs from one end of greater Downtown to the other. The general feeling was that, while the system is nearly a non-negotiable item for young professionals, the first leg should have been designed to connect two points of density—Downtown and the Country Club Plaza, for example—rather than simply serve just the business center.

“It’s annoying that you can’t go anywhere without a car,” said Justin Smith, a lawyer with the firm of Shook, Hardy & Bacon.

Despite the current approach of constructing a streetcar line piecemeal, Lee said, “you have to start someplace” if you’re

going to build a system that can eventually serve the broader region.

Mike McKeen, a principal with the fledgling realty firm ePartment Communities, applied a perspective shaped by career experience in or near cities like San Diego, Denver and Salt Lake City, as well as strategic planning experience in the Northland. He noted that, if the line is allowed to progress, plans call for it reaching the popular Briarcliff retail and housing development in Clay County.

The problem with the streetcar, said Claypool, was that “the vision should have been much more public,” instead of being initiated by a pair of voters from a narrowly defined band along the Main Street corridor.

The Ugly

It’s been an albatross around the region’s neck for four decades, and it’s just



1. Millennials, said Brooke Beason, really want to know that their voices will be heard in the workplace. | 2. As people age in the work force, said Brad Carlson, they change their views on which employee benefits mean the most. | 3. Bonyen Lee-Gilmore said her Valentine-area neighbors were pondering the possibility of starting their own neighborhood school.

as much a concern to this group—most of whom have yet to start raising families—as it’s been for those who’ve moved to suburban stretches in that span: Nary a word of praise came forth on behalf of the Kansas City School District.

The comment that came closest to that was the recognition by Meagan Flynn-Mesmer that “you can’t fix just the schools.” Deeply ingrained socioeconomic problems have to be addressed before there can be any hope of raising academic performance, she said. As an example, she cited the efforts of a non-profit group she works with. Volunteers there fill backpacks with food, which urban-core students take home for the weekend, else they go hungry before the schools reopen on Monday mornings.

The Gilmores, who live in the Valentine area between Downtown and Westport, are part of a neighborhood discussion about whether there’s enough critical mass among parents to launch a neighborhood school, at least for kindergarten through fifth grade. On one hand, it’s a positive sign of regrowth in an urban area that had been hollowed out by an exodus of families over the decades. “But then we hear from the school district asking how they can get involved,” she said, spawning concerns that parents and students could end up right back where they started.

Hannah Lofthus, the founding principal of the Ewing Marion Kauffman School, recently became its chief executive. She

said Kansas City’s education field is “greatly behind the education reform curve, which makes it difficult for me to attract great professionals to my staff from cities with strong education-reform climates.”

Education is the greatest barrier holding the city back, Lofthus said, presenting both an opportunity and a threat. Without a serious response to the problems in urban education, families will continue to move into the suburbs and the city will lack sufficient numbers of young professionals entering the work force.

“It will be catastrophic for our city in the next 10-12 years if things continue on the current path,” Lofthus said.

The Workplace

One area where Kansas City could easily bolster its appeal to young professionals, panelists said, was within employer ranks, promoting workplaces that offer Millennials more than just a paycheck. One way to get there is to offer schedules that will continue to allow for flexibility and working from remote locations. “That whole idea of 9-to-5,” said Kyle Claypool, “I think that now, it’s some kind of mythology.”

Brooke Beason noted that it’s nice to be at an ad agency where beer is available after-hours, and where the break room is stocked with M&Ms. But Millennials at their core really want to work for com-

panies where their concerns will be heard by senior managers, she said.

Then, too, said Bonyen Lee, it’s the littlest things that go a long way,” such as having quality coffee available for their employees.

Thirty years ago, Brooke Beason said, employee satisfaction could be gauged in part by whether a job allowed you to own your own home. For a cohort that has lived through a period where the biggest investments in their parents’ lives—their homes—have lost huge sums in value, there’s less interest in home ownership today, a greater desire to live in vibrant neighborhoods with more population density, more service businesses, and especially more local restaurants, panelists agreed.

And while employer-paid health-care coverage is a nice perk, it’s not the end-all for this group, particularly given the changes in the insurance market being wrought by federal regulatory changes. Then again, said Brad Carlson, “I think we all view benefits differently as we age.”

Philanthropy

A highly promising trend—at least for a region that has seen few philanthropists rise to such iconic status as families like the Halls and Blochs—is, as Kyle Claypool said, that “philanthropy has been

democratized.” Millennials, he said, “are more interested in making the world a better place.”

Brooke Beason noted the impact that technology had made on one’s ability to become part of something larger, as with being able to text a \$10 donation to an on-line relief effort. Meagan Flynn-Mesmer agreed, citing a recent fund-raiser where a silent auction was being conducted through a smartphone app, with bidders still at their tables being notified that their offers had been upstaged, and asked if they wanted to increase their bids by \$5.

Justin Smith, whose law firm Shook Hardy & Bacon boasts perhaps the single most robust pro-bono structure in Kansas City, recounted the emotional impact of being able to assist as a guardian ad litem in the recent adoption of an infant, making sure that “now he’s in a good home.”

Setting an Agenda

Invited to give a bare-knuckles assessment of what Kansas City needs to build on its successes, most on the panel demonstrated commendable levels of diplomacy. The closest anyone came to even a tinge of anarchy came from Kyle Claypool: “We need to start electing legislators who are sane,” he declared. For every advance the region makes in being recognized as a haven for young entrepreneurs, or the creative masses, he said, it suffers a setback from buffoonish legislative moves that become staples for late-night comedians.

Also coming in for shared derision around the table was a familiar burr under the saddle of older civic leadership: the state-line divide. Implicit in that concern was that the region suffered from public-sector leadership that either didn’t truly care, or was truly incapable of forging a workable cross-border dynamic.

In either case, most agreed, the root

problem was the level of apathy among voters—their own generation, in particular—that allowed under-performing politicians to enter office in the first place.

“We just don’t care,” said Bonyen Lee. She recounted election-cycle assignments to conduct televised infamous man-on-the-street interviews. When asked questions about candidates or public policy, “95 percent of the people just don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

Matt McKeen cautioned against generalizations, noting that two of his friends were running for City Council at comparatively young ages, “and I’ve only been here six years, so I don’t have that many friends.”

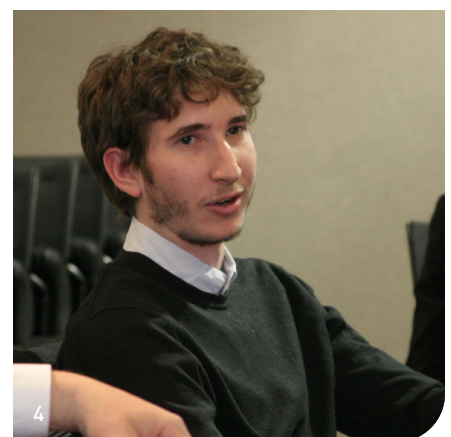
Meagan Flynn-Mesmer said the region would do well to address continuing the sprawl of suburban development. And, as a native of Montana, she lamented the lack of challenging outdoor venues here.

“Kansas City lacks a big picture for growth,” said Brad Carlson. Blake Fulton, his business partner chimed in by noting that the region suffers from an overabundance of ineffective committees and an appalling lack of heroes. George Brett was great for Kansas City in his day, Fulton said, “but we need some gods.”

Jordan Bell-Masterson, of the Kaufman Foundation, pointed out that the metro area suffered a deplorable lack of diversity. It’s not a region lacking in diverse people, his peers believe, but the divisions along racial, social and economic lines is defeating the larger goal of having a truly diverse population.

“All of those issues bleed together,” said Brooke Beason. Kansas City, she argued, needs a defined style, much like the weird factor that defines Austin. Then, too, Beason said, “Kansas City needs a bigger ego.”

Drew Gilmore seized on that theme, as well. “We’ve got this chip on our shoulder,” he said. “But for whatever negatives there are, this is a very cool city.” **1**



1. Entrepreneurial activity in Kansas City, said Blake Miller, “is damn near exploding.”
 2. Justin Smith noted the potential for engaging in philanthropic efforts to improve life in the city. | 3. Whatever flaws Kansas City has, said Drew Gilmore, “this is a very cool city.”
 4. The metro area may be diverse overall, but it’s not a truly diverse community in practice, said Jordan Bell-Masterson.