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Cleveland County's Award-Winning Ai Workforce Humanoid Takes National Stage At International Economic Development Council Annual Meeting

From a $1 million federal investment to a potential national model, Cleveland County Futures demonstrates how local partnerships and artificial intelligence can connect talent, employers, and opportunity.

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CLEVELAND COUNTY, OKLAHOMA - An innovative workforce initiative developed in Cleveland County, Oklahoma, is gaining national attention for its approach to one of economic development's most persistent challenges: connecting people with meaningful career opportunities while helping businesses find, develop, and retain the talent they need to grow.



With the assistance of the first economic development organization to employ a humanoid in the country, the Cleveland County Economic Development Coalition (CCEDC) presented Cleveland County Futures, an AI-powered, hyperlocal workforce and career exploration platform, at the International Economic Development Council's (IEDC) 2026 Annual Conference, held October 25–28 in New Orleans.

The presentation, titled "From a Million-Dollar ARPA Bet to a National Blueprint: How an IEDC Award-Winning EDO Built the Hyper-Local AI That Generic AI Tools Can't Touch," introduced economic development professionals to an initiative that combines advanced technology, local workforce intelligence, employer storytelling, and community partnerships.

CLEVELAND COUNTY FUTURES
A CLEVELAND COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COALITION PROGRAM

Developed through a $1 million investment of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, Cleveland County Futures is part of a broader CCEDC initiative recognized with a 2025 IEDC Excellence in Economic Development Award for Best Use of Federal Resources.

"Workforce availability has become one of the defining economic development challenges of our time," said Lawrence McKinney, CEcD, CCE, President and CEO of CCEDC. "We recognized that simply attracting new talent is not enough. We must also help people discover the opportunities already around them and give employers greater confidence that they can find the talent they need to succeed. Cleveland County Futures represents a significant investment in doing both."

Turning Local Talent into Local Opportunity
Unlike traditional job boards or general-purpose synthetic intelligence tools, Cleveland County Futures is designed around the economic realities, employers, industries, and educational resources of a specific geographic area.

The platform helps individuals discover career opportunities they may never have considered, identify transferable skills, explore available positions with local employers, and connect with training and support resources that can help them take the next step.

A high school student exploring career possibilities, a veteran transitioning into civilian employment, a parent returning to the workforce or an experienced professional considering a career change can each begin from a different starting point and receive a personalized exploration of opportunities in Cleveland County.

At the heart of the initiative is a simple mission: **Inform. Inspire. Connect.**

"Cleveland County has extraordinary employers, educational institutions and talented people, yet those assets are not always connected in ways that benefit our communities," McKinney said. "Our goal is to make those connections visible and actionable. When someone can see a future for themselves here, and an employer can see a pathway to building its workforce here, the entire county becomes more competitive."

The platform also recognizes that career advancement requires more than identifying an open position. Users can explore local education and certification opportunities, resume and interview resources, and assistance related to childcare, transportation, housing, and other barriers that can prevent individuals from entering or advancing into the workforce.

A New Approach to Workforce Development
During the national presentation, Nick Hathaway, CEO of Brio Data Group, explained how Cleveland County Futures applies the concept of translational skilling; identifying skills individuals already possess and showing how those abilities can translate into different occupations and industries. This approach recognizes that people are more than their job titles, and that their experience often applies to other occupations in ways they may not realize.

"Too often, communities lose talented people not because opportunities are absent, but because those opportunities are invisible to the people who could fill them," Hathaway said. "Cleveland County Futures brings together workforce data, local knowledge and personalized technology to help individuals understand where they fit, what they can achieve and how to get there. That creates an opportunity to strengthen families, businesses and the local economy at the same time."

Brittany Hughes, CEO of PATH, demonstrated how the platform allows users to explore careers through two distinct pathways: industries that are growing in Cleveland County or the skills and experiences an individual already possesses.

The platform provides information about local employers, career requirements, skill alignment, potential gaps, and available training. Participating employers can also access dashboards designed to provide insights into how individuals engage with their company profiles, career information, and videos.

"Many workforce tools can tell someone what jobs exist somewhere in the country. We wanted to help people understand what is possible right here," Hughes said. "By combining personalized technology with actual employers, local opportunities and clear pathways to advancement, we can help communities turn workforce awareness into meaningful action. It's about attracting talent, retaining talent and helping people recognize opportunities they might otherwise overlook."

Bringing Employers and Careers to Life

A distinctive feature of Cleveland County Futures is its use of authentic local storytelling to introduce individuals to employers, industries, and careers. Working with Oklahoma-based creative partner NextThought, the initiative features videos highlighting actual employees, workplaces, and career experiences across Cleveland County.

During the conference, attendees viewed a video featuring Hitachi Vantara's Norman operation, including an employee discussing quality assurance, sustainability initiatives, professional development, and the company's community involvement. The presentation demonstrated how employer storytelling can reveal opportunities that traditional job descriptions often fail to communicate.

The initiative is designed to highlight 12 local industry clusters, providing a more comprehensive picture of Cleveland County's economic diversity and career opportunities.

For employers, the platform offers a new way to introduce their organizations to prospective employees, communicate workplace culture and connect with individuals whose skills may align with current or future workforce needs.

Oklahoma Innovation with National Potential

The presentation also attracted the attention of Oklahoma economic development leadership, including Barbra Coffee, CEcD, Executive Director of Economic Development, Growth and Expansion (EDGE) at the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, who attended the session.

"What impressed me about Cleveland County Futures is that it goes beyond using artificial intelligence simply because the technology is available. It applies innovation to a fundamental economic development challenge,

connecting Oklahoma talent with Oklahoma opportunity," Coffee said. "This is the kind of forward-thinking, collaborative approach that can strengthen our state's workforce competitiveness. Cleveland County is demonstrating how local leadership, strategic partnerships and technology can work together to create solutions with potential relevance for communities across Oklahoma and beyond."

Economic development professionals attending the national conference also responded enthusiastically. Jason C. Mundo, P.E., CEcD, Vice President of Mundo and Associates in Dallas, Texas, praised the platform's practical approach to linking workforce skills with career opportunities. "After seeing the presentation, it is clear that Cleveland County Futures both understands and is executing the mission: to inform, to inspire, and to connect with a personalized and curated focus to take its community from skills to opportunity," Mundo said.

The recognition reflects growing interest in how communities can use emerging technologies to address workforce challenges while maintaining a strong focus on local employers, residents, and economic priorities. The national presentation highlighted not only the technology, but also the role economic development organizations can play in bringing together partners with complementary expertise.

CCEDC served as the community convener, working with Brio Data Group on workforce research and data, PATH on technology and personalized career exploration, and NextThought on authentic employer storytelling. Local employers, education partners and county leadership contributed the community knowledge necessary to make the initiative relevant to Cleveland County.

The resulting approach offers lessons for other communities seeking to address workforce challenges without building technology independently.

Building a Stronger Countywide Economy

For CCEDC, Cleveland County Futures also reflects the organization's broader ONE County strategy, which emphasizes collaboration across municipal boundaries and partnerships that expand economic opportunity throughout Cleveland County. The initiative is designed to serve residents and employers across the county, from its larger population centers to smaller communities where access to career information, training and workforce resources can be more limited. Rod Cleveland, a County Commissioner and Chairman of the Oklahoma Workforce Innovation Board, said, “We invested $1 million in this program because we know the #1 issue affecting employers is the lack of available talent. This program uses incredible technology to harness every opportunity, look around every corner, and connect emerging and skilled talent with jobs and careers that elevate their lives and our economy. That’s a winning combination everywhere!”



As Cleveland County Futures moves through its early implementation, CCEDC and its partners will continue evaluating user engagement, employer participation, workforce outcomes and long-term sustainability. The coalition sees potential for the approach to inform workforce strategies in other communities while maintaining its primary focus on delivering meaningful results for Cleveland County residents and employers.

"Our investment was never about creating another jobs website," McKinney added. "It was about building an economic development tool that can help our employers and existing businesses grow, strengthen our ability to attract new investment and give more people a reason to build their futures in Cleveland County. If other communities can learn from what we've developed, that makes the investment even more meaningful."

To explore Cleveland County Futures, visit Explore careers | Opportunity Paths

Employers interested in learning more contact CCEDC at Info@selectclevelandcounty.com

About the Cleveland County Economic Development Coalition

The Cleveland County Economic Development Coalition (CCEDC), is a countywide economic development organization dedicated to strengthening business competitiveness, attracting investment, supporting entrepreneurship and expanding economic opportunity throughout Cleveland County, Oklahoma. Through its ONE County strategy, CCEDC connects communities, employers, educational institutions and strategic partners to advance coordinated economic growth and long-term regional prosperity.