Podcast #2/Transcript/LWR

**The Workforce Lens:** Session #2 with Kevin Smalling, Vice President of Business Development and Security Programs at Wamar Technologies

**Shannon Bryant:** Greetings and welcome to the second installment of our podcast series, “The Workforce Lens,” brought to you by Tarrant County College in North Texas. I am Shannon Bryant, Executive Vice President, Corporate Solutions & Economic Development, and I will be your host, moderating strategic conversations with developers and employers on all things related to preparing and growing the workforce – today and in the future.

Today, our guest is Kevin Smalling, Vice President of Business Development and Security Programs at Wamar Technologies. Kevin, we are super excited to have you here today. I got the joy of being able to explore your facility here not too long ago. Thank you and welcome to the podcast.

**Kevin Smalling:** You sure did and thank you for inviting me here today. I’m very pleased to be here and talk about our company, being new to the area. So, thank you for the invite.

**Shannon Bryant:** Absolutely and we’ll get into all of those details. Kevin, can you start out by telling our audience a little bit about Wamar? What your industry is? Your location? And just some details about the company overall?

**Kevin Smalling:** Absolutely. I’m more than glad to. We are Wamar Technologies. We are an armored vehicle manufacturer. We mainly deal with U.S. Government agencies – Department of State, Department of Defense, FBI – and we also do local and state agencies, as well. Our primary mission and purpose is to manufacture armored vehicles. Most are very specialized. They are not the average “Brinks” truck that you may see on the road. They are more for VIP protection, foreign service officers, ambassadors, directors and heads of agencies in the U.S. Government.

**Shannon Bryant:** Very good. And how long has the company been in business?

**Kevin Smalling:** The company has been in business for just under 20 years now at a couple of locations. We started in Atlanta, Georgia and we still have a satellite office there. We chose to move, and it was a strategic move. Every company evolves and grows. We chose to move to the Dallas-Fort Worth area and this is now where our headquarters is based.

**Shannon Bryant:** Okay, that was what I wondering, if this was considered your headquarters location. So, that comes to the second question. Kevin, can you tell us a little bit about why Texas was selected for the expansion and the ultimate decision to move to the DFW area?

**Kevin Smalling:** Yes, so we did a lot of searching and we looked at where the best economy was for us – a lot of things like main lines of transportation, ease of access, a strong workforce, a diverse workforce that has a lot of talent in the automotive industry, specifically in our specialty of armoring. And, we narrowed it down to Texas, obviously we are here …

**Shannon Bryant:** … and we are super excited to have you here …

**Kevin Smalling:** … so are we, everyone is loving it here. The economy is very strong here. It’s very favorable towards businesses. Things like what we are doing today happens here – not that they don’t happen in other places, but it seems to be more of an exciting and expanding business environment here in this section of Texas. So, the main reason we chose it is because of the economy. It is a good location, we also have an affiliate here on the huge corporate ownership side called GDC Technique, so our main facility is right next to theirs, it’s at the end of Alliance field, in Northwest Fort Worth. It’s a great facility, brand new for us, and it allows us to do every aspect, from the beginning stages of our manufacturing and tear down, to the final assembly and polish of the vehicles we produce.

**Shannon Bryant:** How many square feet do you have at the new plant?

**Kevin Smalling:** Sixty thousand and there’s another 8,000 of admin spaces.

**Shannon Bryant:** So, room to grow. Wonderful.So, Kevin, getting to know your industry a little more, can you tell us, what does the competitive landscape look like for your type of business?

**Kevin Smalling:** Well, in Texas, specifically, there are a couple of other armored vehicle manufacturers. None of them are bad. They are good in their own way on what they do. We of course think that we are bringing another level of quality to that arena with our products and we are very proud of them.

Something I always say is that, if something leaves our door, I want to be able to say to that customer that I would personally be willing to sit in it and feel confident that it would protect me. I’m getting a little off track from your question, I guess …

**Shannon Bryant:** … that’s okay …

**Kevin Smalling:** It’s a little bit competitive in that it is feast or famine. So, if one or two companies get a huge order or a contract from the government or another agency or entity, even for them, it is either feast or famine. You either have a huge order or you are trickling in one or two. So, it is very competitive and what sets us apart is the quality that we put into our vehicles.

 **Shannon Bryant:** Absolutely. So, out of curiosity, how does a company like yours put the word out on the street about your products and services? How do you market and promote your products?

**Kevin Smalling:** We do our best to advertise with our networking and former and current clients. We get out and I personally get out and meet people. I go to police offices, SWAT offices and then the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce has done a great deal to help us here. That was one of the first things I immediately sought out upon arrival or soon after, was to get on with them, become a member and then make networking and introductions to people I think would be interested in our products.

**Shannon Bryant:** Okay. Those relationships are certainly …

**Kevin Smalling:** And podcasts like this …

**Shannon Bryant:** … there you go! Someone is out there listening, right?

**Kevin Smalling:** I’m sure they are …

**Shannon Bryant:** Alright, so I’m interested to know, how has your move to North Texas given you access to any new consumer segments or allowed you to expand into new growth markets.

**Kevin Smalling:** Well, new consumer segments would be … you all have a greater number of police forces, large police forces, I should say, you also have the largest border here. So, we are looking a heading down that way, talking to border patrol, the Department of Homeland Security, as well. So that is an extension for us. Because of the physical location of Atlanta, it just wasn’t available. So, that is one of the main areas that we are looking to engage with. 7:19

**Shannon Bryant:** That makes perfect sense. How many employees do you have here in Tarrant County?

**Kevin Smalling:** Right now, we are carrying about 35 [employees], and that’s including salaried employees.

 **Shannon Bryant:**  How many of those 35 came from Georgia upon the move here?

**Kevin Smalling:** There’s only about three of us. I’m one of them. The owner said I need you to go out there and spearhead this. Start getting everything together about a little over a year ago. I, of course, jumped at it. I love Texas. It is a great State and great people here – very warm, very friendly. So, there were about three of us. Our chief [of] armor, he kind of does a deployed to the job “thing,” and then he goes back home to see his family about once a month. It is pretty hard on him but he is a real trooper and a dedicated employee. There’s about three of us and then one of the other gentlemen is in the accounting section. He moved over as well.

 **Shannon Bryant:**  Wonderful. Well, we are happy to have you in here and have you expanding in the area. Speaking of that, what are your growth plans for your employee base here?

**Kevin Smalling:** Well, it really depends on my engagement with all of the local entities. Obviously, an company would want to see enormous growth, but it depends on the environment, the economic climate. The political climate also influences that. Not so much politics at the National level, but how that bleeds down into budgets for any type of security program or vehicles, etc. So, that will effect our sales. You can’t sell something to somebody that is not in the market for it.

**Shannon Bryant:** Exactly.

**Kevin Smalling:** Hopefully, and I think things will go positive for us, just on my outlook of how things are going to go for this industry and us in particular, I think we’ll do well, and it will financially work for us. We’re hoping to increase our workforce, sourcing from local talent.

**Shannon Bryant:** I’m curious to know, speaking of the workforce, what type of positions and skillsets are your currently hiring for?

**Kevin Smalling:** Currently we’re ending a couple of projects and we’re not in the hiring phase right now, but we soon will be. We’re expecting imminent award of a fairly large contract from the U.S. Government and, upon award, as soon as we get a verbal notification that it’s been awarded, we’ll be looking for skilled laborers. Upholstering. Body work. Painting. Automotive. And also, I think is where your area comes in, hiring some young talent straight out of a technical college -- Engineering. Automotive engineering – and give them an opportunity, a unique start in their career or their focus of study, to work with an armored vehicle company. Not a lot of people get to say that …

**Shannon Bryant:** That’s pretty exciting …

**Kevin Smalling:** Yeah, I would say so, especially for a young woman or man coming straight out of college.

**Shannon Bryant:** Absolutely. So, I’m curious to know, so you said you have 35 employees and only three of those folks came from Georgia, have you found it easy to hire the talent pipeline you need thus far, and do you have any concerns about hiring the new pipeline, based on any new awards or contracts you might get?

**Kevin Smalling:** No, no concerns at all. Texas has an enormous workforce and, again, an extremely diverse amount of talent in the workforce here. It was very easy for us to find the right people with the right skills and experience so far, and we have absolutely no worries or concerns about finding them in the future.

**Shannon Bryant:** Okay, wonderful. So what surprised you most about your relocation to Texas? Anything that’s come up that surprised you?

**Kevin Smalling:** Well, I’m originally from Kentucky so I would say the weather, but I’m use to all of it.

**Shannon Bryant:** Well,I’m from Ohio, I get that, right, especially a few weeks ago.

**Kevin Smalling:** Yes, I think everybody jokes about the weather here. I would say the main thing is the sincerity. I was talking with some friends a few weeks ago back home and overseas and they were asking me, “How’s Texas? Have you got a cowboy hat yet?”

**Shannon Bryant:** I noticed you have boots on …

**Kevin Smalling:** I do! … but I would say the sincerity of the hospitality really, really struck me. Again, I’m from Kentucky. We are known for being really nice people and showing hospitality. But, as an example going into a local marketplace, the grocery store, and I was obviously lost, and a lady took the time to say, “Can I help you find something? You look like this is the first time you’ve been in this grocery store.” I said, “No Ma’am, I just moved here and I’m just trying to get oriented.” And she said, “Welcome to Texas. We’re glad to have you here. What are you doing here? Where are you from?” I just kept running into that everywhere, not just the grocery store. Again, the sincerity of the hospitality. It is very genuine here.

**Shannon Bryant:** I would absolutely agree with you, as someone only being here about a year and a half myself. That’s wonderful. So, I guess the last question I’m a little bit bias on. Tell us from your perspective as an employer, what role or benefit – and you can speak to this from either your move here to Texas or the time that you had in Georgia with your facility – what role or benefit do community colleges such as TCC play in the role of workforce development today of organizations like yours?

**Kevin Smalling:** I would say it is a small part because I don’t think it capitalized on enough. I don’t think employers take enough advantage of it, but I think it is a force multiplier if people choose to engage and pull from with that resource. Get out, make liaison with the small community college or the technical college. The subject matter expert or the technical expert you’ve been looking for may be right there under your nose, you know, three or four miles down the road at a small community college, or a large community college, like this one, a technical college, because you’ve got all of that talent right there.

Just because someone is younger or maybe doesn’t have a ton of experience due to their age, doesn’t mean they aren’t talented or have technical expertise. So, I think any company should take advantage of that and become more engaged with their local community and education establishments. Is that the right word?

**Shannon Bryant:** Yeah, absolutely, it certainly is. And that’s the whole purpose of this podcast, right?, is to start to put a light or a lens on, if you will, that community colleges really are the workforce provider for organizations.

**Kevin Smalling:** I obviously concur. Think of the name. Community. It’s your community. It’s people from that community. It’s you community college. They are there. They are from the local community. They’re local and it is a resource that I don’t think is tapped into enough.

**Shannon Bryant:** Does Wamar do anything in the way of apprenticeship programs? Do you? Have you given consideration into that?

**Kevin Smalling:** Yes, in Atlanta, we had several people come and they were on an apprenticeship program with us. They did very well and we’re looking to do that here. Right now were kind of jumping in with both feet to get the contracts that were currently being worked finished, but, just like myself, we’re taking steps to reach our goals, but yes, we do intend to do that here.

**Shannon Bryant:** Well, Kevin, we’ve really enjoyed having you on the show. Do you have any last minute thoughts?

**Kevin Smalling**: No, thank you again for having me here. My CEO, the owner of the company, is excited to listen in and hear a recording of this.

**Shannon Bryant:** Well, we’ll certainly make that happen. Is your CEO in Georgia?

**Kevin Smalling**: No, he’s currently overseas on some other business.

**Shannon Bryant:** Okay, maybe we can get him in the studio sometime when he comes to visit.

**Kevin Smalling**: I’ll let him know, he may be up for that. Thank you again.

**Shannon Bryant:** Thank you so much, Kevin, we look forward to seeing you all on a future podcast of the Workforce Lens. Thank you!

**Kevin Smalling**: Thank you. Have a good day.