

Labor 'storm' is coming

Economic tempest brews with too few skilled workers, unfilled jobs, stranded employers.

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A Lancaster County restaurateur has turned to Central America in an effort to fill job openings.

Thomas E. Strauss Inc., owner of Miller's Smorgasbord and of Plain & Fancy Farm & Dining Room, has hired eight Costa Ricans to fill seasonal jobs that go begging for help during the height of the local tourist season. Filling the service-oriented jobs is especially tough given the

local labor shortage. Meanwhile, Costa Rica faces a high rate of joblessness.

"I saw opportunity and no people on one hand, and people and no opportunity on the other," said Thomas Yatsko, who worked for the restaurant company for 20 years as a manager.

Yatsko's brainstrom is an example of the creativity Lancaster County employers have had to exercise to deal with the labor shortage.

With 2.3 percent unemployment and a U.S. economy that continues to expand, it doesn't

look like the county's shallow labor pool is going to fill up anytime soon.

With its labor situation, Lancaster County is set squarely in the path of what one employment expert calls "the perfect storm."

Like the weather patterns that set the stage for a natural disaster, the county's economic base is poised precariously on the edge of turmoil.

That is if certain forces are allowed to prevail, said Dr. Ira Wolfe, president of Success Performance Solutions, Leola, and

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one of the main suppliers of current work force statistics to Lancaster County businesses.

Those forces include:

- A rapidly expanding economy. The new jobs are service- and technology-oriented, far from the traditional manufac-

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turing base on which Lancaster County has long thrived.

- A community at full employment.
- Changing demographics, including a lower birthrate and a graying workforce with fewer young people to replace those who retire.
- An older population that is living longer and demanding more services, especially in health care.

- A wide gap between education and business. Those with a low level of education get stuck in dead-end jobs. Meanwhile, employers' growth is stunted because they can't find enough skilled workers to fill new technical jobs and/or they won't pay to upgrade employees' skills.

● A shift in workers' attitudes toward their employers, particularly those who think nothing of jumping from job to job in search of higher pay, better benefits or a more flexible work schedule.

● Intense global competition, where suppliers and vendors are forced to keep prices low while increasing output but with fewer workers. Those who fail to keep up will lose out.

■ The bad news is if you think it's worrisome now, the labor shortage and all its ill effects haven't really hit Lancaster County yet. "This labor shortage will not blow over," Wolfe said.

The good news, say job experts, is there is still time to correct the problems and create a work force that is educated and employable in both old and new economy jobs. Lancaster can allow existing businesses to grow while making room for new businesses to locate here.

"Employers realize they have a lot of work to do," said Wolfe, a former dentist.

To that end, the year-old Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board will sponsor a summit Thursday at Liberty Place. The daylong event will bring together business people, educators and public leaders to discuss the labor issues that threaten the community's economic growth, and subsequently, its quality of life.

"There is not a singular solution to the coming problems," cautioned Wolfe, who will present the results of a month-long survey on the attitudes of local workers and employers.

■ While some local experts say the problems are just beginning, others say many of the solutions are already here.

"We have a lot of good resources in Lancaster County" to train, recruit and educate workers, said Beverly Wise Hill, chairwoman of the Workforce Investment Board.

Unfortunately, she said, a lot of groups are duplicating efforts instead of coordinating resources. "We need to work in the same direction," she said. "We can get farther faster if we don't duplicate programs."

Despite a proliferation of "less-than-ideal" job candidates, area job-placement officials say prejudices run rampant among Lancaster County employers.

Some employers, they say, ignore groups of people who are eager to learn and ready to work — workers 55 years and older, people with disabilities and minority workers. Many employers believe these people are expensive to hire and train and difficult to retain.

The stereotypes even affect the well-educated — some college graduates with liberal arts degrees are told they have no skills that apply to today's high-tech and service-oriented economy.

David K. Nikoloff, executive director of the Economic Development Co. of Lancaster County, said a recent work force study commissioned by his office "appears to link a low level of educational attainment with the lack of new job growth" in high-paying technical and professional fields.

He said both employers and

workers have to think less in terms of working one's way up a ladder in business, and more in terms of a more flexible job market where workers go beyond the traditional career paths and continuously seek training throughout their whole careers.

"Today's young worker can expect to change careers three to four times in his or her lifetime," Nikoloff said.

Many of today's companies care more about the human quotient than infrastructure and tax incentives, Nikoloff said. A well-educated work force is the main draw for new high-paying jobs.

Scott Sheely, executive director of the Lancaster County Workforce Investment Board, agrees. "Companies today ask, 'Do you have the work force and is it trained?'"

A technical-based manufacturer in need of skilled labor may be attracted to relocate and grow in the Lancaster area because of its low cost of living, rural traditions and proximity to major metropolitan markets, airports and shipping hubs. That company will look to an area where it knows worker training and education is taking place, Sheely said.

Besides creating a slowdown in new spending, a shallow, stagnant

job market will slowly change a community's culture and quality of life. Without enough employees to meet customer demand, employers will have to rethink the way they do business, said Sheely, who is a wholesale jeweler.

"Retail will have to look at its current practices and ask, 'Do we want to stay open 24 hours a day? Do we want to open that second store?'" he said. "It's an important development for a local economy that includes a large retail and hospitality base, he said.

"We may see a different type of hospitality industry in the next 10 to 15 years," he said.

FYI

What: Workforce Summit
When: 8 a.m.-4 p.m.
Thursday, Nov. 30
Where: Liberty Place, 313 W. Liberty St.
Cost: \$25, includes continental breakfast and lunch
Information/registration: Workforce Investment Board, 397-3531



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