

Heather Boulger: Shift happens — including workforce development

- By Heather Boulger Oct 15, 2022



The MassHire Berkshire Career Center, run by the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board, is a key destination for local job seekers.

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It's not new news that the pandemic changed things, especially workforce demands. For the past several months, the MassHire team has been meeting with over 800 companies to better understand the collective impact on Berkshire County and how our workforce has shifted. Here are our key findings:

- Eighty-one percent of employers had difficulty hiring in the past 12 months (up significantly from 56 percent in 2019).
- Every industry struggled with almost every occupation.
- Top reasons for recruitment challenges: “Too few applicants;” “Employability issues;” and “Offered pay was too low.”
- In response, employers tried revising pay of existing and new hires, provided training, and offered flexible scheduling.
- 40 percent used the workforce system; lack of awareness the top reason for those who didn't.
- Use of online resources to recruit was higher than in previous years.

- Eighty-two percent of employers confident about success in the coming year.

A few observations

The reemergence of a genuine work-life balance is driving and redefining job quality and quality of life. MassHire will continue to provide training programs that develop the right skills for our job seekers to succeed in virtual work and in-person services. Not just for the jobs of today but also tomorrow.

Workers matter. Most people finally recognize those essential workers who continued to show up and provide critical services. Grocery store attendants, truck drivers, warehouse workers, first responders, teachers, manufacturing, mail carriers, drivers, nurses, medical professionals, etc. are treated with greater respect. MassHire has a number of upcoming career fairs to help connect to these vital workers.

Great resignation — in which nationally 38 million workers quit their jobs. Some of the most experienced workers, baby boomers who had spent years climbing the ladder and working long hours, decided it was time to retire. This impacted about 2,000 people in the Berkshire workforce.

Tight labor force. Restrictive immigration policies, 50 years of low birth rates, and aging population has left us with fewer working-age people. Companies will have to work harder to find and keep employees. And it's not just about raising the pay. Younger generations are seeking help with mental health issues, want to feel appreciated and valued, and want a focus on diversity and social equity in the workplace.

Solutions to the shift

Last month was Workforce Development Month, which gives us reason to celebrate the Berkshires' workforce development successes, and highlight some new initiatives that will shift and upgrade the skills of workers, connect talent to job openings, and help job seekers transition into new opportunities.

For context, the latest Berkshire employment statistics (August 2022) show the area unemployment rate of 4.0 percent, with more than 61,084 people in the labor force. The Pittsfield over-the-year employment change shows an increase of 500 jobs (1.1 percent), which reflects a growing confidence in the regional economy. In fiscal 2022, the Berkshire workforce system assisted 2,843 people, 950 companies, 3,500 youth and leveraged \$1.8 million to train 150 workers.

MassHire is tasked to attract and prepare job seekers to succeed in today's and tomorrow's jobs. "Think globally and act locally." We are constantly shifting our workforce system to meet these needs. There is an abundance of information for employers and for job seekers at [MassHireBerkshire.com](https://www.masshireberkshire.com).

Training. One of the best ways for employers to retain talent in the region is by providing skills development and training opportunities. Berkshire County companies have received more than \$10 million in workforce training funds to train more than 11,000 workers since its inception. This fund is a vital tool for many companies to upgrade employees' skills and increase productivity.

Workforce skills education and training plays an enormous role in economic and personal development by helping residents acquire the skills they need to connect with promising careers. Gov. Charlie Baker recently announced a nursing assistant training grant to MassHire and Workforce Skills Capital Grants to Berkshire Community College, McCann Technical School, and Berkshire Innovation Center to modernize equipment to offer greater career pathway opportunities in health care, hospitality and manufacturing.

MassHire Job/Career Fairs. MassHire will be hosting a STEM & Manufacturing Career Fair from 10 a.m. to noon Oct. 21 at Berkshire Innovation Center; a New England Job Fair (virtual) Nov. 15-16; and weekly on-site recruitments, career center seminars, workshops, and much more. Job seekers and people looking to advance their careers are encouraged to visit MassHire Career Center at 160 North St. in Pittsfield for a wide array of career counseling; job clubs;

workshops; resume support; online application and interviewing tips; job search strategies; and much more. Attend a career center seminar to learn about all they have to offer.

MassHire Job Quest is a statewide database to help match skills to employment opportunities and to help companies find employees. This free online portal helps job candidates and employers with their workforce needs and shifts in careers.

Market Maker/Business Service Rep. These are our Business 411 resources for hiring and recruitment assistance, tax incentives, training grants, business development support, and more. These services will help Berkshire businesses' bottom line and help keep them competitive.

MassHire does our best work together, whatever the sector or the amount of shift. The partnerships between workforce development, education, Berkshire businesses and talent development agencies are absolutely vital to meeting tomorrow's workforce challenges. MassHire programs like College/Career Readiness, Jobs4Youth, and Industry Sector Training are all designed to help businesses connect with workers and implement a worker training program that supplies them with a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers well into the future.

Over the next few months, MassHire will showcase a series of business tours, listening sessions and workforce appreciation events designed to highlight proven workforce strategies, solicit feedback from our partners and acknowledge the hard work of our staff that is helping drive our workforce success. With over 3,212 jobs currently available on the JobQuest [website](https://tinyurl.com/3rtuh56m) (tinyurl.com/3rtuh56m), and projections showing nearly 1,000 job openings to fill annually through 2024, there is more work to be done.

MassHire is confident that through hard work, dedication and the work ethic of the Berkshire worker, we will continue to meet those challenges and move our region forward — no matter what shifts arise.

Heather Boulger is executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield.