**Heather Boulger | Inside the Job Market: What are you thankful for?**

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**By Heather Boulger**

**PITTSFIELD —** `Tis the season to be grateful. For many, the month of November provides us with an opportunity to show our appreciation and thankfulness for our friends, family members and loved ones. For some, however, gratitude can be challenging to find when there are so many people to help, so many meetings to attend, so many deadlines, so many obligations, so much daily stress, and just not enough time in the day.   
  
One of my goals for this hectic time of year is to take time each day to count my blessings, identify what I am thankful for, and to pay it forward.  
  
The Berkshire County unemployment rate is 3.5 percent. That's good news for the local economy with 66,433 people in the labor force and 64,118 people employed. It is our goal at MassHire to help the 2,315 unemployed county residents and those looking for career changes to connect them to the myriad of workforce programs to find their perfect employment opportunity here in the Berkshires.  
  
As of last Thursday, there were 1,289 job postings in the Berkshires on the JobQuest website and hundreds more posted on other venues. For an overview of local workforce services and employment opportunities visit masshireBerkshireCC.  
  
**REMEMBER THE VETERANS**  
  
Pay it forward this November by thanking a veteran. We are able to celebrate our blessings and freedoms because of the sacrifices of our military veterans. There are 9,718 military veterans living in the Berkshires. The labor force participation rate for veterans in the Berkshires is 72 percent, and the unemployment rate is 9.8 percent. Twenty eight percent of local veterans have a disability. There are 1,424 veteran-owned firms in the Berkshires as well.  
  
MassHire Berkshire Career Center, formerly the BerkshireWorks Career Center, provides priority of service to veterans and can help access employment and training opportunities. Massachusetts employers that hire a veteran may be eligible for a federal tax credit. Let's show our veterans that we appreciate their sacrifices each and every day.   
  
**THINK SMALL**  
  
Support our small businesses all year long, too. There are 3,868 commercial establishments in Berkshire County, and 88 percent are considered to be small businesses. These firms employ more than 53,000 people. When we support small businesses, jobs are created and local communities preserve or develop a unique culture. The money spent at small businesses also stays local because it goes back into the local economy.  
  
Retailers will be spending this week preparing for Small Business Saturday, which takes place the day after Black Friday.  
  
It's shaping up to be a holly, jolly holiday shopping season, according to the National Retail Federation's annual holiday spending forecast. The NRF predicts that consumers will spend an average of $1,007.24 this year, up 4.1 percent from the $967.13 that they said they would spend in 2017.   
  
Consumers are expected to spend an average of $637 on gifts, $214 on non-gift holiday items like food, decorations, flowers and greeting cards, and $154 on non-gift purchases that take advantage of deals and promotions.   
  
Total retail sales for November and December are expected to be between 4.3 percent and 4.8 percent higher than last year, with total spending expected to be between $717.45 billion and $720.89 billion. Forty percent of shoppers began making holiday purchases on Nov. 1.  
  
That's good news for Berkshire County because retail is the second largest job sector in the Berkshires employing 8,587 people, 14.1 percent of the county's total workforce.   
  
Retail is one of the country's most technically advanced and innovative sectors, offering varied and rewarding career possibilities. Many jobs in this sector involve high degrees of skill, whether in food hygiene or nutrition, logistics, planning and construction, design, marketing or buying. Anyone with a job that results in a consumer product — from those who supply the raw materials to factory workers to the truck drivers who deliver goods to stores — counts on the retail sector for their livelihood.   
  
The majority of retailers are small businesses — 71 percent of retail stores have fewer than 10 employees, according to the NRF. The industry as a whole supports one of every four jobs in the United States. Half of all employed teenagers work in the retail sector. More than a third of retail employees work part-time, and 60 percent are women.   
  
Retail stores account for 70 percent of the country's gross national product. And despite the rise in online shopping opportunities, industry research indicates that 90 percent of U.S. retail sales still take place in brick-and-mortar locations. Berkshire County knows firsthand the importance of the holiday season for our local retailers, so please shop local this holiday season.  
  
The retail industry's future depends on a robust pipeline of highly qualified talent to meet the increasingly sophisticated demands of modern retail. Of those 1,289 Berkshire job vacancies listed on JobQuest, 202 are in sales and customer service.   
  
But retail is an industry that also allows you to pick any passion and pursue it down an exciting career path, filled with endless opportunities for professional development and career advancement. Although sales jobs are mostly closely associated with the retail sector, 44 percent of its employees do not work in sales positions. There are accountants, artists, computer programmers, merchandise displayers, architects and engineers, protective workers, and more. So, if you want an engaging, competitive career...consider a job in the retail industry.  
  
And don't forget that the best part of gratitude is that it is contagious. They say it isn't happy people who are thankful, it is thankful people who are happy. When you encourage a culture of gratitude in your office you will see everyone being more positive toward one another. Any act of kindness from your heart will be greatly appreciated by the receiver. Think about that this month.  
  
*Heather Boulger is the executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield.*