

The Berkshire Eagle



The author says that, even during the coronavirus pandemic, many companies are geared to handle the job application process remotely, so, don't stop your job search - and keep networking, especially on LinkedIn, where recruiters are actively seeking candidates.
Heather Boulger | Inside the Job Market: Workforce resilience during a pandemic

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By Heather Boulger,

PITTSFIELD — How quickly life can change. The coronavirus pandemic has affected every workplace in the country in one way or another, including the 3,846 companies in the Berkshires. Some employers have closed their doors temporarily, while others have asked their employees to work from home, or have given extra paid unpaid leave to employees with health concerns or child care responsibilities.

Many essential businesses, from supermarkets to gas stations to health care facilities, have remained open but provide their employees protective equipment to reduce their chances of contracting the virus. Some companies managed to pivot their products and services to be responsive to current needs, while other companies may never recover and may be forced to close.

The Berkshire Workforce Board has worked with more than 150 companies this month; all are concerned about their workers. Their concerns include retaining talent after furloughs or layoffs, keeping their remote talent productive, keeping motivation and morale strong, embracing change, leading new employees and keeping their workers safe and healthy. Despite unprecedented uncertainty, leaders are encouraging their employees to connect remotely, encouraging self-growth through podcasts, videos and articles, and having social distancing fun.

While the worst of the outbreak will, hopefully, be over soon, this pandemic has created workplace changes, and many employers have had to restructure their workforces.

Vulnerability and resilience

It goes without saying that this is a difficult and confusing time for everyone, including those of us who are charged with managing a small business. On a personal level, we are worried about our own families and loved ones. But, we also worry about our "work family" we have built, and we want to do everything in our power to keep the business afloat.

Whether you are a farmer, a restaurateur, a manufacturer, or a leader in a small nonprofit organization, times like these show how vulnerable we can be and how resilient we are.

As social distancing continues around the world in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, offices are closed but work continues to get done. People are adjusting as meetings and social functions have migrated to videoconferencing services like Zoom, collaboration takes place on WebX, and the kitchen table serves as a workstation and classroom. As social distancing continues in the United States, one has to wonder: Is this our new normal, and what happens when the orders are lifted, business resumes and employees return to work?

Let's start where we began. The March 2020 unemployment rate in the Berkshires was 4.4 percent (down 0.3 percent from a year ago), reflecting 62,447 people in the labor force; 59,691 people employed and 2,756 people unemployed. There were 1,584 job vacancies listed in the Berkshires on Job Quest, with 45 percent being full-time, technical/professional jobs. Many companies had job openings and were finding it challenging to find a skilled workforce, and our rapid response team was working with four companies to help with layoffs.

For the past four weeks, the MassHire system has helped hundreds of companies with outplacement assistance, layoff aversion strategies, and information about unemployment insurance, layoffs and furloughs. Dozens of companies took advantage of the state's WorkShare program, purchased remote-access equipment to adapt to the current environment, and explored options to retain and upskill employees through virtual training. Dozens of referrals were made to our economic development and community partners who assisted with identifying numerous loans, grants, and other means to help our small businesses and humanitarian efforts to help our residents.

March and April unemployment claims rose dramatically across Massachusetts as lockdown orders began to shutter businesses in response to the pandemic. Nearly 550,000 unemployment insurance claims were filed (the average is 17,000 per month) in Massachusetts as part of the CARES Act and Paycheck Protection Program. The commonwealth has ramped up and trained staff (going from 50 to 850 in three weeks) and has deployed more than 350,000 claims.

Claims in the first two weeks in March alone jumped by 29 percent in the Berkshires. The hardest-hit occupations included food preparation, entertainment, services, personal care, office and administrative support and transportation.

One in every five jobs in the Berkshires (about 13,000) is health care and social assistance. Many of these workers remain on the front line. The next top Berkshire industry sectors are accommodation and food service, employing about 8,000, and retail, employing about 7,900.

Many of these workers have been laid off or furloughed. Educational services employ about 7,000 workers who are mostly working remotely. Manufacturing employs 4,000 and construction employs 3,000, rounding out the top industry sectors in the region. Some of these sectors were able to pivot their operations and innovate to continue working.

What are the impacts?

As the shock of mandatory remote work requirements begins to diminish, current businesses continue to consider the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on workforce resiliency. This pandemic transformed business operations overnight. Most organizations mandated work at home, causing chaos and confusion. Few were prepared for such a massive change.

COVID-19 is rapidly transforming the workforce and how work is being done. From updated leave policies to asking all possible employees to work from home, employers are implementing a variety of innovative strategies to manage the impact of the coronavirus on the workforce. People are sewing masks, companies are making personal protective equipment, distilleries are making hand sanitizer ... and the list goes on. The Berkshires are innovators; leaders and resilient!

Companies are still hiring; although many companies have been impacted and implemented a hiring freeze, delayed training or made cuts due to a decline in demand, many other companies are hiring

Job postings are increasing rapidly for candidates with the required skills, and employers have ramped up hiring. Retail and delivery services are adding new employees, and essential services like health care, education and warehousing are also rapidly hiring. Visit MassHireBerkshireCC.com and JobQuest for the latest free job postings. There are currently over 700 jobs posted in the last 30 days in the Berkshires.

Many companies are geared to handle the application process remotely, so, don't stop your job search. Keep networking, especially on LinkedIn, where recruiters are actively seeking candidates, and maintain your connections with MassHire Berkshire Career Center counselors at MassHireBerkshireCC.com for virtual workshops and seminars. Take some time to brush up on your video and phone interview skills and techniques so you are prepared to make the best impression.

Please know that the MassHire Team is working hard to help businesses and residents get through this unprecedented crisis. Everyone's rituals have changed, and we are learning a new rhythm and pace in the workforce. We are a strong community and we will weather this storm together. The Berkshires are resilient, and we will thrive again. Stay well and stay strong.

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