

## A (socially) distant memory? Berkshire employers turning more to virtual hiring events

- By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle
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Berkshire Family & Individual Resources in North Adams, which held its most recent virtual hiring event April 15, prefers assessing job candidates virtually, rather than in person. “It has saved my recruiter a ton of time, as far as travel time and going to events,” said Michelle Baity, BFAIR’s senior vice president of human resources.

- GILLIAN JONES — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE



Because of rapid advances in technology, virtual hiring events probably were inevitable. But, because the process had to be accelerated amid the coronavirus pandemic, it took time for employers and employees to figure it out.

PITTSFIELD — [Berkshire County Arc](#) used to schedule face-to-face interviews with prospective job candidates every other month.

“Our very last one was the week before COVID hit really hard in the Berkshires,” said Kristi Nastars, the agency’s director of human resources.

So, out of necessity, the human services organization that offers community-based services to those with developmental disabilities turned to technology and began conducting virtual hiring events. The concept has worked so well that Berkshire County Arc has held nine virtual hiring events in a little over a year.

“We have found that virtual events have been our second-most productive way of hiring people,” said Berkshire County Arc CEO Ken Singer.

It isn’t the only employer to have been pleasantly surprised.

The transition from traditional in-person to virtual hiring events, begun almost completely on the fly because of the coronavirus pandemic, is proving to be so successful locally that those in the Berkshires who are involved in hiring and workforce training believe that they are here to stay.

“I think virtual job fairs are the new normal. I think at some point employers will do regular job fairs again, but right now, it just seems to be efficient, cost effective and successful.”

— Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield

“I think virtual job fairs are the new normal,” said Heather Boulger, executive director of the [MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board](#) in Pittsfield, which will be holding its spring job fair virtually through the [MassHire Berkshire Career Center](#) on April 27. “I think at some point employers will do regular job fairs again, but right now, it just seems to be efficient, cost effective and successful.”

The MassHire Berkshire Career Center has hosted 11 virtual hiring events since last year, and also participated in one statewide event, according to the career center’s director, Melanie Gelaznik.

Boulger, who is a member of the statewide return-to-work committee, said MassHire might begin to see job candidates in person again by June, although only by appointment. But, when the pandemic ends, she expects the state to hold live and virtual events.

“I think it will be a combination,” she said, “another tool in the toolbox, as we always say.”

[Berkshire Family & Individual Resources](#) in North Adams, which held its most recent virtual hiring event April 15, prefers assessing job candidates virtually, rather than in person.

“It has saved my recruiter a ton of time, as far as travel time and going to events,” said Michelle Baity, BFAIR’s senior vice president of human resources. “You get there [to a job fair], you

have to set up [a booth], and you have to break it down. For a two- or three-hour job fair, she's potentially tied up for four or five hours of the day."

With virtual events, "it could be a two- or three-hour job fair, but as long as candidates aren't flowing through quickly, she can also continue on with her work," Baity said. "It's not as disruptive in her workflow. She's still able to accomplish a lot."

Nastars said there can be a downside to holding virtual hiring events, but that the negatives are minor.

"Under normal circumstances, what we like to do, especially with our direct care staff, is, the manager interviews them face-to-face, and then if both parties think it's a good fit, they send them out to the houses to meet the other employees at that house, as well as the other individuals they would be caring for, and we get feedback from everybody," she said. "That can't be done with a virtual hiring event.

"So, there have been a few, quote/unquote, bad hires," she said. "But, percentagewise, not at all."

Because of the rapid advances in technology, virtual hiring events probably were inevitable.

"I definitely think it would have happened," Boulger said. "The pandemic just expedited the process."

But, because the process had to be accelerated, it took time for employers and employees to figure it out. Many employers have turned to the Zoom platform to conduct virtual hiring events. MassHire is holding virtual events on Premier Virtual, an online virtual job and career fair platform.

Berkshire County Arc was one of the organizations that initially had to scramble before finding the right platform.

"We had already done, with a URL, registration for our in-person hiring event," said Nastars, recalling BC Arc's first attempts at holding virtual hiring events.

"He [Berkshire County Arc's marketing person] literally changed it to guaranteed phone interviews. ... We went with it with a little trepidation, like, is this really going to pull at all? And it was like, wow, it worked."

Going from in-person to virtual happened so quickly that it caught some job seekers by surprise.

"It's taking a little time for the job seekers to catch on," Boulger said. "The initial response that we've had so far is that the number of job seekers is a little bit lower, but the quality of the candidates is really good."

According to [brazen.com](https://www.brazen.com), a firm that stages virtual hiring events, virtual job fairs have higher participation rates than in-person recruiting events, with attendance at online gatherings

averaging about 70 percent, as compared with an average of 50 percent for live ones. Higher-quality candidates also attend virtual events, the company states.

Bruce, of Pittsfield, a job seeker who declined to provide his last name, said there are pros and cons to the live and virtual approaches.

“When you’re sitting down with someone, there’s direct feedback, there’s no delay,” he said, referring to meeting with employers in person. He experienced the other approach during a virtual recruitment event conducted by the [Pittsfield Police Department](#).

“With this one, the person on the other end is often chatting with multiple people at once,” he said. “You kind of have to, like, sit there for a few minutes to wait for them to respond. But, it was very engaging, and I found it just as informative. The questions I had about the position were definitely answered.”

Elizabeth Charpentier, of Pittsfield, participated in a virtual hiring event put on by MassHire. She watched a YouTube video on virtual job fairs before participating.

“Everything was easy, except for the part where I had to submit my resume,” she said. “When I hit ‘submit,’ I got a message back — I’m not sure if it was an automatic message — that said to send my resume to somewhere else. ... I didn’t get any confirmation that anyone received my resume.”

But, that glitch hasn’t discouraged her.

“I would do it again,” she said.

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