

Heather Boulger | Inside the Job Market: Thanking our veterans and supporting small business

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The MassHire Berkshire 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.

'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 6.0 percent, which shows 61,319 people in the labor force, with 57,666 employed. This is better news than a year ago, when the rate was 8.6 percent.

It is our goal at MassHire to help the remaining 3,653 unemployed county residents and those looking for career changes to connect them to the myriad workforce programs to find their perfect employment opportunity here in the Berkshires.

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 the next few weeks 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.

Last year saw extraordinary growth in online shopping to meet their needs during the pandemic; however, households are also expected to shift back to in-store shopping as well. The NRF expects retailers will hire 500,000 to 665,000 seasonal workers, which compares with 486,000 in 2020.

The NRF predicts that consumers will spend 8.5 to 10.5 percent more this holiday season, with an average of \$1,347 per consumer. Shoppers between the ages of 35 and 44 plan to spend the most, at \$1,458.

Consumers are expected to spend an average of \$998 on gifts, \$231 on nongift holiday items, like food, decorations, flowers and greeting cards, and \$118 on nongift purchases that take advantage of deals and promotions.

Ninety percent of consumers plan to celebrate the winter holidays this year, 73 percent plan to use their smartphone or tablet to research or make a purchase, and 19 percent are early bird shoppers who started in September or earlier. This year, shoppers are starting earlier than ever, with 49 percent beginning to buy before November!

Retail opportunities

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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. 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.

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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 bricks-and-mortar locations. Berkshire County knows firsthand the importance of the holiday season for our local retailers, so, please shop local this holiday season.

Thanksgiving falls at an opportune time on the calendar. We are heading into the holiday season, when we are reminded of what is most important to us.

We will soon be approaching the end of the year, when we take stock of the past year and set goals for the coming one. We can all find more room for gratitude in both our personal and professional lives. This is a perfect time of year to translate our feelings of thankfulness into daily practice, and to thank our veterans and support our small businesses.