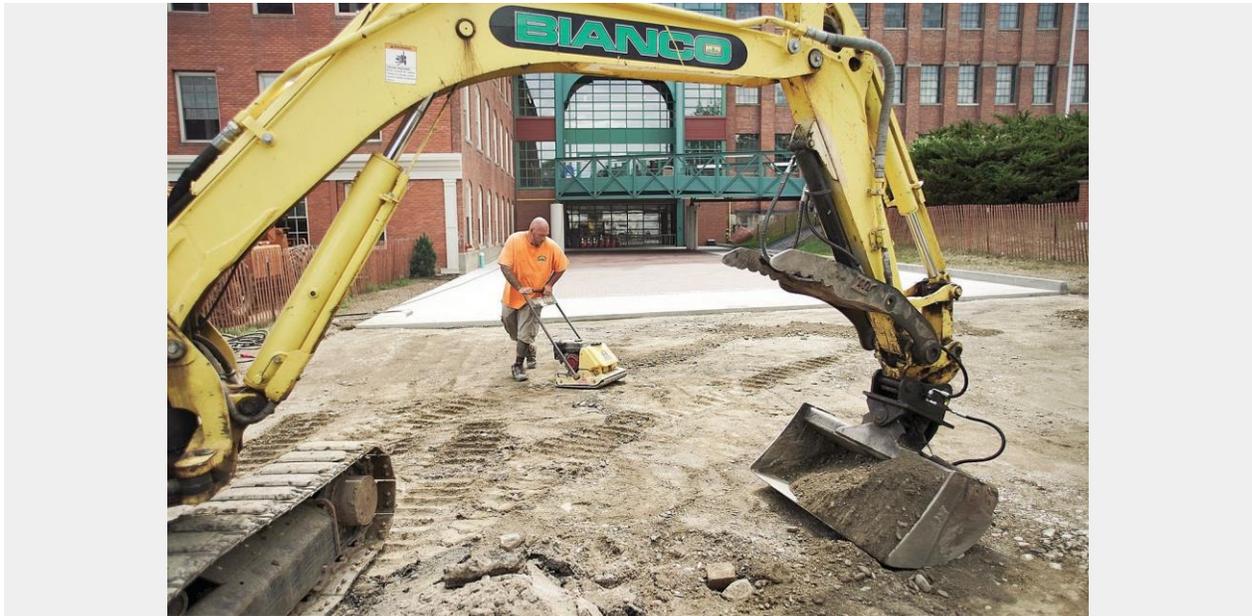


The Berkshire Eagle



Workers from Michael A Bianco Landscaping Inc. on Tuesday continue building a new entrance to the Clock Tower Business Center in Pittsfield in preparation for the arrival of a call center for the Boston-based online retailer Wayfair.

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Hiring underway, construction continues: How Wayfair call center is faring along the way

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By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — Philip Lapointe currently works for a burger joint in Pittsfield but has previous experience in sales that he would like to put to good use.

So, it's only natural that the 34-year-old Pittsfield resident would be interested in working for Wayfair, which is currently hiring sales and service consultants for its new Pittsfield call center.

"I applied because they have strong wages and seem like an employee-oriented company," Lapointe said Wednesday as he left the MassHire Berkshire Career Center on North Street following an interview with Wayfair representatives.

Lapointe has plenty of company in his job search.

Wayfair, the Boston-based online seller of home goods, is simultaneously hiring staff while putting the finishing touches on its new Pittsfield facility, which is scheduled to open in October at the Clock Tower Business Center, according to the company's director of sales and marketing, Pete Boudreaux. The official opening date will be announced after Oct. 1, he said. The Pittsfield facility will be Wayfair's eighth sales and service center in the United States.

Co-founded by CEO Niraj Shah, who grew up in Pittsfield, Wayfair eventually plans to employ 300 workers at its new call center, with the workforce consisting of both management and sales positions, Boudreaux said. Wayfair is expected to hire 188 people this year and then add 112 more positions by 2021, according to the company's application to the state's Economic Assistance Coordinating Council, which approved a tax incentive package in December that allowed the company to expand its headquarters in Boston and open the call center in Pittsfield.

"The way we hire folks is in classes," said Wayfair's senior project operations manager Cindy Motaka, who is overseeing the company's hiring efforts at the career center, which began on Aug. 20. The initial class of sales and service consultants will consist of 25 to 30 employees, Motaka said. A slightly smaller second class of employees is expected to join them before the end of October.

"We're real big on the employee experience, setting people up for success," she said. "That's why we have a phased rollout instead of hiring a whole bunch of people at a time."

Once on board, each sales and service consultant class will receive five weeks of on-the-job training, two weeks of in-classroom work, and three weeks of "real customer contact," Motaka said.

"That way, if you have someone who has never taken a phone call they will have 100 percent customer support," she said. "They raise their hands and someone helps them."

Hiring for the facility's remaining management positions in human resources, training, recruiting and employment engagement is also taking place, but not at the career center. Wayfair is also looking for a site director for its Pittsfield facility. One senior manager position is being filled by a former Pittsfield resident who is moving back to the Berkshires from Michigan, Boudreaux said.

The unemployment rates in Berkshire County and the city of Pittsfield are currently at their lowest levels of the year, at 3 percent and 3.4 percent, respectively. But over 2,000 county residents are currently receiving jobless benefits, and there has been no shortage of candidates for Wayfair's available sales and service positions.

While prospective employees are required to apply online, 25 in-person interviews were conducted for those positions on Aug. 20 during Wayfair's first hiring session at the career center, followed by 23 interviews the following day. Wayfair was using four rooms at the career center to conduct in-person interviews at two hiring sessions last week, said the center's executive director Melanie Gelaznik. At least four other interview sessions at the career center are scheduled to take place on Sept. 10-11 and Sept. 17-18, Gelaznik said, adding that her office is planning to work with Wayfair until Sept. 30.

"I'm pleasantly surprised by the quality of candidates that are coming in," she said. "They obviously did their homework before coming through our doors."

Currently the country's 12th largest online retailer, Wayfair arrives in Pittsfield with both pluses and minuses on its balance sheet. In May, Wayfair was named to the Fortune 500 list of the country's top companies for the first time after compiling \$6.8 billion in sales in 2018, a \$2.1 billion increase over the previous year. But despite posting a 45 percent increase in direct retail net revenue and increasing its active customer base by 38 percent last year, Wayfair hasn't turned

a profit since it went public in October 2014. The company lost half a billion dollars in 2018, after losing \$245 million the year before, according to Fortune.com and The Boston Globe.

In an interview with The Eagle last year, Shah said the expansion of Wayfair's international operations, which he termed "pretty ambitious," has had the biggest effect on the company's bottom line. Wayfair's domestic operations, which make up the majority of its sales, are profitable, he said.

"The total business doesn't make money," Shah said.

Those numbers don't seem to matter to prospective employees like Lapointe. Although he currently works in the food service industry, the Springfield native previously managed a contracting company in Georgia and has sold both timeshares and cellphones. Except for his current position, "my career has been in sales or customer service.

"It seems like they're going to look for people who fit their needs," Lapointe said. "They're looking for quality employees."

Another selling point: On day one, Wayfair employees receive a full benefits package, including medical and dental insurance, and a matching 401(k), according to Boudreaux.

"There's no waiting period," he said.

Company representatives declined to discuss the pay scale for newly hired employees, but in December, citing information from Wayfair's careers page, The Eagle reported call center employees will make between \$16 and \$19 per hour, with administrative positions paying between \$50,000 and \$90,000 per year. A high school diploma or its equivalent is required for candidates for the sales and services positions.

Information on job openings in Pittsfield is available online on Wayfair's career page and with MassHire at masshireberkshirecc.com.

As hiring progresses, work on Wayfair's new facility has been slowly taking place. The new call center will be located on three floors in a section of the business park located between the Clock Tower condominium complex and The Berkshire Eagle. Work on the new site began in the spring. David Carver, a partner at CT Management Group of North Adams, which owns the Clock Tower complex, said he believes that 80 to 85 percent of the renovation work has been completed and that the remaining 10 to 15 percent should "go very quickly" with the opening scheduled for October.

The new space will include a reception area on the ground floor and work spaces on all three floors, Boudreaux and Carver said.

"We will have an open work environment like in all our places," Boudreaux said. "There will be a gaming area in the break room."

Wayfair considered several sites in Pittsfield, including the William Stanley Business Park of the Berkshires, before deciding on the Clock Tower.

"With a location close to the heart of Pittsfield and the unique space that it offered, we thought that it would be good for us," Boudreaux said.

The call center's initial hours of operation will be from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. They will eventually expand to 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday; 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday; and 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, according to Wayfair.

With so many new employees joining the business center, CT Management Group has repaved an 80-plus space parking lot that it owns across South Church Street from the condominium complex to relieve the traffic congestion..

"We had that lot," Carver said. "Our lot [the Clock Tower's current parking area] isn't big enough to complement the full complement once they're fully staffed. They're going to need a lot more than 80 spaces."

Originally built in 1883 for use as a clock factory, and later occupied by a paper manufacturer, the Clock Tower Business Center was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. The building's historical significance was also a selling point.

"We liked the design of it, the old historic elements of the building," Boudreaux said. "You can add a lot of modern touches to the building, but it still has that old look and feel."

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