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Take-home kits put useful info in job-seekers' hands

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Job fairs can be an effective way for job-seekers to connect with employers to learn what they are looking for and what they have to offer.

The pandemic altered that process by putting a halt to in-person job fairs and shifting them to the digital realm, such as a virtual job fair held by the MassHire Berkshire Career Center on April 27. This approach made it easier for some job-seekers to "attend" by eliminating the need to travel to a physical location, but presented barriers for others without ready Internet access.

And, while the return of in-person job fairs may be on the not-too-distant horizon, both formats ultimately have a pool of potential job-seekers who for one reason or another are unable to attend.

In an effort to resolve these barriers, the Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield's public library, is putting together take-home job-fair kits for individuals seeking employment and/or job-searching tips.

"We want to try to replicate the kind of materials people would bring home from a job fair," said Alicia Hyman, outreach librarian at the Athenaeum.

Those materials may include brochures or flyers provided by participating employers with information about their business or organization and about employment opportunities there. The kits may also include some of the "swag" given out at live job fairs, such as notebooks, pens, stress balls or key chains.

Hyman noted that the kits will also include a booklet of job-seeking tips provided by MassHire Berkshire Career Center, which is assisting with coordination and promotion of the project.

"They have been tremendously supportive of this," Hyman said, noting that they have



Alicia Hyman, outreach librarian at the Berkshire Athenaeum, displays some of the informational material and promotional items provided by area employers for inclusion in job-fair kits that will be available to people seeking employment. "We want to try to replicate the kind of materials people would bring home from a job fair," says Hyman, who initiated the project in coordination with the MassHire Berkshire Career Center.

helped get word out to employers about participating in the project and are even providing the reusable tote bags that will used for the job-fair kits.

Melanie Herzig, business services representative at the Career Center, described the job-fair kits as "a great idea" and one that the Career Center was very happy to support.

"Alicia reached out to me to see if we were interested in coordinating this, and I was immediately excited about it," said Herzig.

Hyman said the idea for the kits came from an article she read in library journal about a public library in Texas that had done a version of job kits during the pandemic. "When I read that, I thought it was something that we could do here that would benefit the community," she said.

Hyman herself is relatively new to the community, having moved here from New York City earlier this year to begin her new position at the Athenaeum. "I've been here three months," she said in a late May interview.

She noted that the library's last outreach librarian had left just before the pandemic in early 2020, and that she had applied for the opening as part of her own job search after earning a master's degree in library and information science.

During the pandemic, the library has moved through various stages of reduced operations — from complete shutdown at the start to gradual reopening for limited services and hours. As of June 1, however, it has fully reopened (along with other city offices).

Hyman said that, in addition to "day-to-day library stuff" her position also includes a number of other less mundane activities. "I get to work on some really cool programs," she said. Among these are the Athenaeum's

"library of things" in which a wide range of non-book items are available for checkout, and its "seed library" which got started in April in time for the growing season.

"It's my job to make community connections," she said. "That's what this [job-fair kit] project is all about."

Hyman noted that she would continue reaching out to area business through the month of June and would then begin compiling the material provided by participating employers into the actual kits.

"We're starting out with 25 bags, with the potential to do more," she said.

Although that part of the project may be completed by the time this article is published, Hyman encouraged employers interested in participating to contact her at alicia@pittsfieldlibrary.org or 413-499-9480 ext. 202.

Once the kits are compiled, Hyman said outreach to job-seekers would begin. "When we get closer to the kits being ready, MassHire will help get the word out to job-seekers about their availability," she said, noting that they expect to start handing out the kits on June 28.

The Athenaeum will also make its patrons aware of the kits. "We will have one bag displayed in a high-visibility location in the library," Hyman said.

While the concept arose in response to the pandemic, Hyman said she believes job-fair kits can also play a role even after the health crisis has receded. "I can see the possibility that these will still be relevant," she said.

Herzig agreed, noting that actual job fairs can only go so far in bringing employers and job-seekers together. "I think these [job-fair kits] are a unique new way of reaching people looking for tips on job seeking," she said. ♦

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