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Now Hiring!

With unemployment falling, it's easier to find a job.

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For years, the most common window signs in western Washtenaw advertised vacant spaces desperately seeking tenants. But lately that's changed to "Help Wanted" or some more urgent variant. At Aubree's in Dexter an oversized, flapping banner shouts "Employment Opportunities Now Available!!" In Saline, a placard and a chalkboard let anyone who passes know that Mac's is "Hiring Service Team Members."

For the first time since the Great Recession, talk of a labor shortage--rather than a job shortage--is in the air. Unemployment in Washtenaw County has dropped steadily from 8.1 percent in 2009 to 3.2 percent today, and U-M and state of Michigan white papers forecast labor shortages statewide.

Local senior housing facilities also are hungry for workers. Travis Ringler, executive chef at Brecon Village in Saline, says, "I would love to hire six or seven waitstaff, even if they only wanted two or three shifts a week"--a situation that traditionally worked for local high school kids. The pay starts at \$9.50 per hour, and most make more. Cooks start off at \$11.50 based on experience. While Brecon Village servers receive no tips, those who work full-time get benefits.

Asked where the glitch in the hiring pipeline is, Ringler says, "You name it, we experience it." First, there's a shortage of applicants. "We post on Craigslist, put flyers at churches, community centers." From there, "Some come in but can't pass background checks. Some work for three days and don't come back. Some don't show up for the first day."

"Oh, my God, you have no idea. What's going on with millennials?" asks an exasperated office assistant on the front lines of recruiting and retaining young workers. "Are they too good to work?"

She asked not to be identified for fear of losing her job, though why is she worried? Who would replace her?

Jeff Brown, president of Dexter Builders, says they have "been able to find people to do the lower-skill jobs," but skilled carpenters are hard to find. "The pool wasn't very deep, and more people are hiring." Since the economy has turned around, "we've had better workers get offers from other companies. They think the grass is greener, and they leave."

Chelsea Milling, Chelsea's second-largest employer after the hospital, has vacancies posted on its website, but president Howdy Holmes says that doesn't mean they're experiencing a labor shortage. Holmes is the sixth generation of Holmeses in the flour milling business, and the maker of Jiffy mixes currently employs 320 people, most of whom are hourly. He doesn't have to constantly chase new hires, though, because "we don't have any turnover. The more effort you can put into finding and hiring the right people, the better off you are." He goes through his job vacancies one by one, ticking each off as either a new position or retiree replacement. The only exception is the annual call for a large number of holiday temps to handle baking high season.

Holmes points to another shortage, however. "Back in 1887, all of our employees would have lived locally," but now they can't afford to. He estimates that only twenty-six or twenty-seven Jiffy Mixers have addresses in Washtenaw County. Chelsea, he says, needs "more affordable housing. That's not a criticism; that's just a fact."

At Dexter A&W, manager Ashley Humphrey, who started working there seventeen years ago when she was fourteen, oversees as many as forty-six employees during peak season. She's developed a deep understanding of how jobs fit into young people's lives.

Each spring, when the drive-in reopens, most of her applicants are high school students applying for their first jobs. That means Humphrey has to train them not just how to perform tasks, but "what it means to have a job. I talk to them about how to balance a schedule: Do you have a lot of tests this week? Do you have projects coming up? Make it easy for me to schedule you."

And she works to meet her young staffers' needs. "When I was coming up, the motivation was to make as much money as I could to get out from under my parents," she says. Now, she says, young people are looking for social rewards: they want to make friends and have fun at work. "They want to be praised. I engage them in social media."

While she hasn't seen a fall-off in those first-job applicants with the economic recovery, she is seeing fewer older people looking to the A&W as a second job. But some people start in one category and graduate to the second.

Carhop Christina Bourgoyne, twenty-seven, has worked at A&W for twelve years, twenty-five to thirty hours a week. The mother of a three-year-old, she appreciates that she can work a five-hour shift starting at 11 a.m. She went to school to be a dental assistant and did that for a year, but came back to A&W, because "I make twice as much here. Carhopping averages \$30-\$35 an hour [with tips]. I have a 401k here. Because of Obamacare, health care is the same wherever I go." Bourgoyne says she's always had a second job, and pays for full-time daycare, but her fluctuating wages are cushioned because "I live with my boyfriend and have a couple of roommates. I got lucky; I pay less than \$500 a month to live in Chelsea."

Shawnda Aldrich, twenty-nine, has a similar story. "I pretty much work full-time" at the A&W when it's open, even earning some overtime, for which she is paid time and a half. When the A&W closes for the winter, Aldrich says, she will look for seasonal employment, "closer to home" in Stockbridge. Like Bourgoyne, Aldrich shares expenses with a boyfriend. "It's hard to get jobs that you can actually live on," she says.

For more than twenty-five years, Linda Shears has worked at Dexter A&W when she's not helping to run her husband's plumbing business. She echoes Jeff Brown's perception that the real labor shortage is in the skilled building trades, especially tile setters. "Companies are willing to train people," she says, "but somehow they've got to get the word out."

They've also got to deal with the realities of the building trades. Shawnda Aldrich's boyfriend is a manager in a construction business. "He used to be a roofer," she notes. "He won't go back to that. It's hard on your body."


A labor shortage means the demand for workers exceeds the supply at the current price, says a U-M economist who asked not to be named or quoted directly. That emphasis on price is an important part of the equation. Some Americans dropped out of the labor force when the recession hit and never climbed back in.

The shy economist says one solution for a shortage of workers is easy: offer more money. In Ann Arbor, several stores and fast-food places are sporting sandwich boards advertising jobs at \$11 an hour, up from \$10 or less a year ago.

While that doesn't seem to be happening yet out-county, savvy employers are offering what seems to be an even rarer commodity, a pleasant working environment. Humphrey at A&W thinks hard about rewarding her millennials in non-monetary ways, though if the earnings her employees report are accurate and consistent, they're also well paid--at least in drive-in season.

At Chelsea Milling, Howdy Holmes dodges questions about pay, but says they spend a lot of time on hiring, training, and retaining. He uses personality tests like Myers-Briggs and 16PF to hire, and has "a director of personal development--that's 'personal' not 'personnel,'" he emphasizes--"primarily responsible for enhancing skill sets, managing career paths, providing resources."

If that sounds like boring HR talk, in plainer language it means that Chelsea Milling offers on-site classes during work hours. A few teach work-useful subjects like computer skills and managing stress, but most fall under the heading of personal growth, from mindfulness to yoga.

The beauty of it, Holmes says, is that "if we can assist someone in broadening their horizons, they become a better mom, a better friend--and, by the way, a better employee." 

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