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INSIDE THE JOB MARKET

A good month to sharpen job skills

PITTSFIELD » September is recognized as workforce development month, a time for job seekers to rejuvenate themselves at the beginning of autumn after what this year turned out to be a long, hot summer.



Heather Boulger
Columnist

This gives us a reason to celebrate the Berkshires' labor and workforce development successes, and highlight some new initiatives that will help upgrade the skills of workers, connect talent to job openings, and help job seekers transition into new opportunities.

For context, the latest Berkshire employment statistics had the area's unemployment rate at 4.3 percent in July — a nine year low — with more than 68,000 people employed in the county's labor force. The local unemployment rates for August will be released by the state on Tuesday.

For the 12 months ending in July, 500 jobs were added in the Pittsfield metro area,

a 1.1 percent increase that reflects a growing confidence in the regional economy. In fiscal 2016 the Berkshire Workforce system assisted 4,443 people, 450 companies, and 2,100 youth and leveraged \$2.8 million to

train 1,250 workers.

The current fiscal year is filled with an abundance of opportunities for employers and for job seekers and there is a plethora of information on www.mass.gov/lwd website.

Here are some of the available programs:

- **MassBizWorks:** This is the business 411 resource for hiring and recruitment assistance, tax incentives, training grants, business development support and more. These services will help Berkshire Businesses' bottom line and help keep them competitive. Companies can visit mass.gov/bizworks or call 800-252-1591 for more information.

- **Upcoming training opportunities:**

BOULGER » PAGE 1

Boulger

FROM PAGE 1

opportunities: When meeting with companies, two of the biggest concerns we hear are retaining and attracting talent. One of the best ways for employers to keep talent in the region is by providing skills development and training opportunities. Berkshire County companies have received more than \$9 million in workforce training funds to train more than 8,000 workers since its inception. This fund is a vital tool for many companies to upgrade employees' skills and increase productivity.

The Berkshire County Regional Employment Board will be hosting a WTFP overview session from 9 to 11 a.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 19, at its headquarters at Central Station, 66 Allen St., in Pittsfield.

This free workshop will help companies access training grants to train current or newly hired workers. More information can be found at BCREB.com.

Workforce skills education and training plays an enormous role in economic and personal development by helping residents acquire the skills that they need to connect with promising careers.

- **Job skills:** Governor Charlie Baker's administration recently announced a \$465,119 Workforce Skills Capital Grant for Berkshire Community College to modernize its manufacturing and engineering programs, and a \$121,128 similar grant for McCann Technical School in North Adams to revamp its welding and metal fab equipment to train students for careers in aero-

space, defense, commercial, medical device and power generation industries.

- **Job fairs:** The BerkshireWorks Career Center will hold its annual Job Fair from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesday at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Pittsfield. There will be more than 50 companies represented, and more than 200 job seekers are expected to attend.

- **Career advancement:** Job seekers and people looking to advance their careers are encouraged to visit the BerkshireWorks Career Center at 160 North St. in Pittsfield for a wide array of career counseling, job clubs, workshops, resume support, online application and interviewing tips, job search strategies, and much more. Attend a career center seminar to learn about all they have to offer. Programs offered at BerkshireWorks can also be accessed online at www.berkshireworks.org.

- **Mass. Talent Connect:** This is a new strategy designed to serve those who have been unemployed for more than six months. It provides services that update the skills of job seekers through assessment, intensive job coaching and possible occupational skills, and educational training services. More information can be found at <http://jobquest.detma.org/jobquest> or by calling 1-800-653-5586.

With the economic progress we have enjoyed comes more challenges. Although the Berkshire economy shows signs of strengthening, many employers are still struggling to find candidates with the desired skills needed to fill their vacant positions or to expand their operations. Our workforce is also aging. But these challenges

also present great opportunities for our workforce. Identifying high growth careers, in-demand skill sets and targeted training opportunities are essential tasks for today's worker, and will increase the probability of landing not just a job, but a family-supporting career.

The partnerships between workforce development, education, Berkshire businesses and talent development agencies are absolutely vital to meeting tomorrow's workforce challenges. BCREB programs like College/Career Readiness, Jobs4Youth, and Industry Sector Training are all designed to help businesses connect with workers and implement a worker training program that supplies them with a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers well into the future.

Over the next few months, BCREB will showcase a series of business tours, listening sessions and workforce appreciation events designed to highlight proven workforce strategies, solicit feedback from our partners and acknowledge the hard work of our staff that is helping drive our workforce success.

Over 1,789 jobs were available on the Massachusetts Job Quest website at the end of last week, and projections indicate that nearly 1,000 job openings will need to be filled annually through 2024. So, there is more work to be done.

I am confident that through hard work, dedication and the work ethic of the Berkshire worker, we will continue to meet those challenges and move our region forward.

Heather Boulger is the executive director of the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board in Pittsfield.