

Meeting demand of a new economy

Job growth in state to require reimagining of the labor pool

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The number of available jobs in Massachusetts is projected to significantly increase over the next decade. However, businesses across the state are saying that there might not be enough qualified workers to fill them.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Economic Research, the number of jobs in the commonwealth is projected to grow by 21 percent by the year 2030. Meanwhile, the workforce is projected to grow by just 1.5 percent.

Local business organizations — such as 1Berkshire, the lead business membership organization of the Berkshires — said the region is noticing the economic impacts of gradually losing the talent pool of qualified workers.



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"It's certainly affecting all levels of entry with employment," Jonathan Butler, the president and CEO of 1Berkshire, said in an interview. "We're not just seeing it in the entry level [jobs], but we're seeing it mid-career. We're seeing it in senior management and leadership. So, it's really a complicated issue."

In recent years, Massachusetts has lost approximately 750,000 more people than it has gained according to reports released by the Massachusetts Taxpayers Association. As a result, local businesses in Massachusetts are struggling to find a sustainable workforce to meet their demands.

"Massachusetts employers are already struggling with labor shortages and a lack of qualified talent that has, in some cases, severely impacted day-to-day operations," John Regan, the president and CEO of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, said in the 2023 State of Massachusetts Business Address given earlier this year. "Companies across all industries, from biotechnology to retail, are unable to fill positions with qualified candidates as the commonwealth loses workers."

Coupled with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the commonwealth experienced a change in how workers look for jobs — with many searching for remote work options or even migrating to different states that have lower costs of living.

"Workers in the post-COVID world are making different choices, many based on improving their quality of life," said Regan. "If workers and employers face skyrocketing housing, energy, and health care costs on top of transportation challenges and lack of child care and elder care support, they will begin to look to new locations to work and raise a family."

Regan stated that the loss of workers can also be attributed to a steady shift in demographics. More than

3 million adults nationwide went into early retirement during the pandemic, according to the Pew Research Center.

In Massachusetts, more college graduates appear to be moving out of the state to areas with warmer climates and lower costs of living. At the same time, baby boomers are exiting the workforce and entering into retirement — creating a significant loss in workers who have the educational and skills requirements for open positions.

Among these open positions, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the majority of the 91,700 jobs gained over the last year related to areas of professional services, scientific research, education and health services, and leisure and hospitality. And while businesses in the Berkshires hold many certified professionals in these growing career fields, Butler said there is always more than can be done to assure the upcoming workforce has the skills necessary to fill

these positions.

"We do a lot of collective work with the business community to try to recruit talent into regions qualified for specialized work," said Butler. "But I think the problem in general is bigger than just education. I feel like there's a disconnect right now with connecting people with career opportunities rather than jobs."

Keith Girouard, the Berkshire regional director for the Massachusetts Small Business Development Center Network, said more focus into how businesses are recruiting and training workers in the talent acquisition process has been prioritized in the region.

"There's a specific kind of plan or approach that needs to be enacted," said Girouard in an interview. "There has to be financial incentives and also lifestyle incentives that actually drive people. And we have a long history of attracting folks who have a high degree of intellectual capital."

Local employers in areas

of tech manufacturing and technical skills — such as General Dynamics — made efforts to create a pipeline for entry-level workers by sourcing directly from local colleges and education programs. However, being the second-largest county by land mass in the state, Girouard said the fact that Berkshire has its roughly 128,657 residents spread across the region leaves some businesses without a sustainable talent pool to source from.

To combat this issue, many businesses in the area have adapted to finding new ways of increasing productivity amidst a smaller and sparser workforce.

"Folks spread over 32 municipalities. That's not very

many people spread over a lot of places," said Girouard. "Because we are a rural county, it's about having some level of career versatility so that there can be some movement."

Industries that cater to the resources the county has, such as tourism and hospitality, have seen investments over the past years, leading to growth and evolution in the economy. Furthermore, Butler said efforts to diversify the workforce — like prioritizing recent graduates, women, immigrants and the inexperienced — can empower more people to enter into it.

"All those points definitely factor into creating an ecosystem that's more approachable and more friendly," said

Butler. "It's about getting people engaged in the workforce. In the Berkshires, we seem to have a pretty good balance."

This balance has made business owners and leaders in the region optimistic about the workforce bouncing back after the pandemic.

"[The pandemic] was the first national disaster, and it was certainly the first economic national disaster," said Girouard. "There is a great resiliency in the county, both in terms of the citizens and residents, but also the leadership. There is great effort in terms of even building that greater resiliency and to be better prepared for disruptions and disasters."

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