

Business

Posted on Thu, Jan. 15, 2004

Author: American labor pool drying up

By Sherry Slater
The Journal Gazette

As the economy roars back to life, employers will find themselves scrambling to keep their worker rosters full, a national author says.

Roger Herman, a strategic business futurist concentrating on workforce and workplace trends, has been making such forecasts for nearly 15 years. The author of "Impending Crisis: Too Many Jobs, Too Few People," Herman will bring his message to the Greater Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce on Friday morning.

More than 150 people are registered for the event, which has reached capacity.

"We are on the threshold of the most severe shortage of skilled labor ever to hit this country," Herman said Wednesday afternoon from his Greensboro, N.C., office. "We're seeing (production) pick-up in many, many industries."

Herman describes skilled jobs as any that require education and training. Those include mechanic, radiology and computer programming positions, among many others.

His forecast of a U.S. worker shortage lasting at least 10 years takes into account skilled jobs lost to off-shoring, including work sent to China and India. And the shortfall will hit even before the bulk of baby boomers start retiring in 2011, he said.

But Herman's message isn't one of doom. Employers can position themselves for the coming workforce shortage, he said.

One way is to hire older workers. Herman expects people who were once bound for the retirement express to remain in the workforce. He cites three reasons: a need to feel productive, a need for income and a need created by worker shortages.

Herman expects people to remain in the workforce - as consultants, contractors and self-employed - into their 80s and 90s.

Another way employers can keep worker rolls healthy is to retain valued employees. Improving the working environment - by becoming what he refers to as "an employer of choice" - can convince employees to stay, laid-off workers to return and job hunters to apply, he said.

Herman and co-author Joyce Gioia provide detailed suggestions in their book "How to

Become an Employer of Choice."

But for some workers, such efforts will be too late. Herman estimates that 30 percent to 40 percent of today's employees already have decided they want to change jobs in the next six to 10 months.

"We call this warm-chair attrition," he said.

Disgruntled workers include long- and short-term employees, Herman said. How soon they flee will depend on their impressions of the economic recovery and how soon other jobs become available.

Employers need to gear up hiring now to make sure their bench of experienced workers is deep enough to survive the lean times ahead, Herman said.

Bettye Poignard, the Greater Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce's vice president for Workforce Development, scheduled Herman as the featured speaker at the breakfast for Skills Now, a worker assessment and training program.

"I think he's very futuristic in his approach to workforce development," she said. "We need to be forward thinking and visionary about these issues so we aren't always reacting rather than acting in positive ways to what's coming. I thought employers in this area would benefit from that and like to hear him."