

StarTribune

Business forum: Attention job applicants

...

Article by: FRED ZIMMERMAN

July 29, 2012 - 6:04 PM

In his well-written Business Forum of July 16, Bill Blazar articulates a situation long of concern to many of us: The "new normal" condition of the state's workforce includes a continuing shortage of qualified workers for the available jobs.

This observation is consistent with many of my own visits with industrial employers in Minnesota and elsewhere. As Blazar points out, there is much that can be done by companies, colleges and universities, and workforce development organizations to better prepare people for employment. Having worked as an employer, corporate director and college professor, I've been exposed to some suggestions that might be useful to job applicants and the role they can play in their own future.

Realistically appraise where employment is needed. Some sectors, such as finance, professional and business services, and government, may very well contract in the next few years. If so, the decline would be overdue, because from 1962 to the present, these three sectors have accounted for 42 percent of U.S.

employment growth. Health care and education accounted for an additional 22 percent. All of these sectors, for a variety of reasons, are quite likely to experience pressures to improve efficiency and reduce employment for the next several years.

Recognize that, among employers, the single most appealing characteristic of applicants is not necessarily education, but character. Education is, of course, is a desired attribute. But it's not, by itself, sufficient. Employers want people who are dependable, have good values, are honest, come to work regularly and on time, and are not prone to use addictive substances -- even casually.

Every company has some trusted managers who possess the knack for hiring capable people who are ultimately promoted. Several decades ago, as a corporate officer, I asked six of these extraordinary recruiters what questions they asked of applicants during the first interview. It was an interesting list involving some of the following questions: "Where did you go on spring break?" "How many wrenches do you own?" "Do you have any relatives who are immigrants or have you helped immigrants?" "Have you fixed many cars?" "How much time do you spend watching TV?" "Which of your former employers did you most admire?" These were all questions aimed more at character and attitudes than at subject matter and future aspirations.

Be practical about where people get their start. One of the great tragedies is that many college graduates are trained for positions they may not hold for several decades, if ever. Relatively little time is spent teaching students how to get the first job and do it well.

Two good friends of mine recently retired as CEOs of large, nationally recognized companies. Both started out in entry-level positions on assembly lines. Many highly successful people in business share similar beginning assignments. My own formative period of fixing IBM machines in the 1950s was perhaps the most fruitful period as preparation for later assignments. It is always prudent to develop the skills enabling you to do the first job well.

Understand that it is better to get a job with a good company than it is to get a good job with just any company. Some companies are good employers, some are not. Good employers have ethical and responsible leadership and well-thought-out



Completing an employment application form with focus on heading

, Star Tribune

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fred Zimmerman is professor emeritus of engineering and management at the University of St. Thomas. He spent many years in industry before entering academia and has served on the boards of directors of several corporations. His e-mail is zimco@visi.com.

strategic plans that work effectively in adverse as well as expanding environments. They have tuition reimbursement and other programs to help employees develop their capabilities. Perhaps most importantly, the leaders of good companies can share center stage. They rejoice, and give credit, when subordinates initiate improvements that company leaders never would have thought of by themselves.

Many lesser companies operate quite differently on each of the above scales. Top management monopolizes the credit, consumes a disproportionate share of corporate resources, and generally fails to recognize the constructive role ordinary people play in the destiny of their companies.

These dichotomies between good and poor companies are well documented in business history. I am reminded of slogan of Lew Veraldi, leader of the highly successful Taurus Sable project at Ford: "Common people doing uncommonly good things." Veraldi, who died in 1990, started as an apprentice tool-and-die maker, was named Automotive Executive of the Year in 1987 for his leadership on the Taurus project.

In roughly four decades as a corporate director, I have come to believe that the raw capabilities of CEOs are perhaps less important than their nurturing of their organization's culture. A corporation's cultural attributes should be of interest to aspiring job seekers.

As Bill Blazar points out, there is much that institutions within our society can do to alleviate the skill gaps we now appear to be experiencing. However, aspiring job applicants might find it useful to assess realistically what they might do, individually, to improve chances for employment.

© 2013 Star Tribune