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At roundtable, focus centers on challenges, boons of doing business in Berkshires

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DALTON — At a roundtable event Thursday afternoon, Berkshire business owners opened up about the challenges to recruiting talent to the area and their methods to overcome them.

The discussion, which was hosted by Berkshire Money Management and moderated by John Krol, who broadcast the event live to his Facebook show, featured Berkshire Money Management's Allen Harris, Barbara Pickwell of Wohrle's, Sarah Eustis of Main Street Hospitality Group, Paul LeBlanc of Zogics, and Fredric D. Rutberg of New England Newspapers Inc. Krol is Pittsfield City Council vice president and represents Ward 6.

"What excites me most about right now, right now in the Berkshires and right now in business, is that we're at this very interesting time where confidence is high," said LeBlanc, who runs one of the country's leading suppliers of products to the health and fitness industry.

"Technology is such that we can do most things from most places. Those things that appear to be threats can also be opportunities."

Every quarter, Berkshire Money Management sponsors the Berkshire Business Confidence Index, mailing out about 5,000 surveys countywide to determine the state of business in the region.

The most recent index concluded that there is "cautious optimism" among businesses, whose biggest concerns include the lack of available skilled labor and their revenue not growing as fast as their costs.

Gathered at Berkshire Money Management's offices in the former Crane Model Farm property on Main Street, business owners spoke about the importance of building a company that is attractive to not only local talent, but also those who might have to relocate for the job.

LeBlanc, who founded Zogics about a decade ago in his garage in Richmond, said that in order to recruit and retain employees, his company focuses on building a culture that attracts attention and being a business for which people want to work.

LeBlanc said that while he has hired talent locally, he also benefits from the transient lifestyle of the millennial generation.

"It's very easy for people to pick up and go," LeBlanc said. "While it's true that people can just as easily leave from here, they can just as easily come here. So, we do more and more of our recruiting from outside the area when we can't find people here."

To combat a high turnover rate of that transient

generation, LeBlanc offers his current employees \$10,000 for each new hire they recruit, but that bonus is paid \$2,000 a year over five years, depending on how long that individual stays with the company.

Not only does that encourage employees to recruit people to the company, but it also gives them an incentive to make sure that the new hire is happy and wants to stick around, LeBlanc said.

And when LeBlanc finds individuals who are suitable for positions at the company, but might not be able to live full time in the Berkshires, like the company's current e-commerce manager in Vermont, he is not opposed to them working remotely.

"We actually have her join us via live video feed throughout the entire day," LeBlanc said about the manager. "She's on an iPad, the iPad's on a tripod, the tripod has a T-shirt, and we take her to meetings."

Harris said that his company tries to stay ahead of the game, seeking out prospective employees for positions that might open up.

"We've brought people who we might potentially hire to corporate events that we've gone to for a week and brought them in and said 'This is who we are'" Harris said. "We're a small firm. We've got 10 people. For us, adding another person is potentially disruptive to the culture if they don't fit."

For Wohrle's Foods, a Pittsfield-based food distributor approaching its centennial, and New England Newspapers Inc., the parent company of The Eagle and three Vermont newspapers, the challenge isn't hiring on the creative or administrative side, but rather finding drivers or skilled laborers to fill manufacturing jobs.

In years past, when Wohrle's Foods advertised an opening for a driver job, it would get 50 to 60 applicants, according to Pickwell.

"These days, we might get 10," she said.

"We have problems sometime finding properly trained pressmen, (and) to pick up on what Barbara was saying, drivers," Rutberg said. "So, finding skilled manufacturing employees is a bit of a difficulty right now. Finding creative people, people who do the writing and designing, is not so difficult."

Another challenge for each of the businesses is the ability of consumers to use technology to find goods and services that are less expensive.

While keeping costs competitive is important, local companies can go only so low before they start losing money.

Eustis, CEO of Main Street Hospitality Group, which manages hotels including The Porches Inn at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary

Art, Hotel on North in Pittsfield and the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, said her company tries to use available technology to its benefit while maintaining the unique and personable customer service that longtime guests value.

While the short-term rental app Airbnb is in one way a competitor of the high-end inns and boutique hotels that Main Street Hospitality manages, the company also works with Airbnb by listing some of its guesthouses and rooms with the online service and by using its "experiences" platform to offer Airbnb users dining options at their properties, she said.

Harris said Berkshire Money Management manages its cost per client by offering more specified services to people with different needs.

Harris also said that business owners shouldn't be reluctant to raise prices if they need to.

"You can raise prices, and it shouldn't be as scary to you as it is ... because everyone else is doing it and it's sort of acceptable," he said. "If you really can't raise the price, it's not a cost problem, it's a value issue: you're not delivering to your client an amount of value that they feel that they should be paying for."

Overall, the business leaders are optimistic about the future of the local economy.

Eustis sees a growing appreciation for the "authenticity" that is available in the Berkshires.

The quality of life in the Berkshires is a "sellable" point for prospective employees, and almost anyone can find somewhere in the county that has what they're looking for, LeBlanc said.

Rutberg, however, reminded the other speakers that, while the Berkshires has a lot to offer, it's also important to address the areas where the region falls short, including the bitter offseason and lack of transportation.

"In all this happy talk about the Berkshires, there's some negatives, and we can't ignore them," he said. "It is a tough place to move to. It can be lonely. It's a long winter."

It's important for employers to recognize those issues and do everything they can to ease the transition for new employees, he said.

"I think that what Sarah said about the Berkshires having authenticity is real. And that is something that we can and should focus on and invest in and grow," Rutberg said. "There are things happening all over this county that are reasons to be optimistic, but it's cautious, because we've heard this before. We've seen this before."

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