

Berkshire Job Summit aims to get employers feeling comfortable - and hiring – again

The Advocate, February 11, 2010

By NICHOLE DUPONT

Posted: 02/10/2010 12:40:20 PM EST



Graphic designers Erin Papa and Meghan Dewar consult with Winstanley Partners COO Ron Thompson. Winstanley will be among more than 50 Berkshire employers at the Berkshire Job Summit, scheduled to be held at the Crowne Plaza on Feb. 19. (COURTESY JACLYN STEVENSON)

Last year was not a very good year. In fact, 2009 was so bad that Nate Winstanley of Winstanley Associates in Lenox would like to strike it completely from the record and start fresh.

"We definitely didn't grow in 2009," he said. "We didn't lose any clients, but a lot of them cut way back. I don't know that it will ever get that bad again."

In response to the tentative economy, on Friday, Feb. 19, Winstanley and more than 50 other Berkshire business owners, leaders and concerned citizens will gather at the Crowne Plaza for the first-ever Berkshire Job Summit. The mission, according to Allen Harris, president of Berkshire Money Management and co-sponsor of the summit, is information.

"We need to inform people that the end of the world is not coming," he said. "We want employers to feel that they are better armed with information and that they have actionable ideas so that they can 'sell their wares,' so to speak."

Harris admitted that selling anything in the current economy was a lesson in risk. But, he said, fear cannot be the driving force behind Berkshire-owned businesses - or any business, for that matter.

"The way of thinking has been to make big, sweeping cuts first, too big," he said. "People have been hiring and firing out of fear. They don't hire until they see something tangible. If their neighbors are hiring, then maybe they will."

It is no wonder that local businesses are wary. With the state unemployment rate at 9.4 percent (which mirrors the national rate of 9.7 percent), Berkshire workers have felt the strain mostly as a result of across-the-board job loss in management and retail services and construction, two industries that have carried the county for decades. According to a May 2009 report from the Massachusetts Office of Labor and Workforce Development, 27.2 percent of Berkshire unemployment insurance claimants are in the construction field. Additionally, 10.3 percent of claimants are in manufacturing.

These numbers unfortunately reflect national unemployment statistics. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for service occupations as of last month is 11.4 percent, while the rate for natural resources, construction and maintenance occupations is at almost 20 percent.

But Sherman Baldwin, host and creator of "Talk Berkshires" (1340 AM, 3 to 6 p.m.) and co-sponsor of the job summit, said that Berkshire businesses should be focusing on recovery, not statistics.

"Employers are still nervous," he said. "The recession has wracked everyone. But, they are now open to hiring because they cut so deeply before they needed to. We want to make sure the Berkshires get their fair share during this job recovery."

According to Winstanley, the key to getting that fair share is being first in line when growth occurs.

"People are cautiously optimistic," he said. "Companies that market hard out of recessions come out on top. At some point, you have to be bold. When demand starts to move forward with more inventories, that's the up tide. That's where you want to be."

Winstanley, like other Berkshire business owners, said the job summit is a much-needed resource, primarily for information.

"I'm going there to listen," he said. "I'm a big supporter of economic growth in the Berkshires."

In fact, growth will be the focus of the summit, according to both Harris and Baldwin.

"We've sent a lot of invitations to larger employers in the area," Harris said. "While some of them are interested, we've found that the people who are coming are the ones who are interested in growing, people like us who are somewhat on the fence but who want to grow. This is exactly what is happening nationally as well. The bulk of employers are in the middle. Businesses are fairly predictable. The people who act first gain the most. It's not warm and fuzzy, but it's true for employers and business leaders."

True, talk of market trends and job statistics is not typically soft-edged, but Baldwin insists that the impetus for the job summit came from a place of compassion for those affected by the bottom line, not the bottom line itself.

"The inspiration for this summit is what 'Talk Berkshires' already does," he said. "We're reaching out to the community and making a difference. Everybody is talking about jobs. We're inspired now to

be commanders of our own fate. I'm seeing the Berkshires move in a positive direction. Now is the time to take the opportunity to hire."

The Berkshire Job Summit will run from 8:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. Friday, Feb. 19, at the Crowne Plaza in Pittsfield. Guest speaker Ron Insana, CNBC's senior analyst, will give the keynote address. For more information, visit berkshirejobsummit.com.