



THE PLAIN DEALER

Filling the high-tech skills gap

Thursday, June 14, 2007

Several recent surveys confirm that information-technology companies in Greater Cleveland are hungry for recruits. More like starving.

A hiring index from Robert Half International, characterizing the employment outlook for IT companies in Greater Cleveland in the third quarter of 2007, shows that more than one in 10 will be adding staff.

If they can find workers, that is.

The gap in Northeast Ohio between the jobs high-tech employers need to fill and the supply of workers available for those jobs is reaching crisis proportions, according to nonprofit advocates who help those companies.

That's ironic, considering that this region's job market, overall, actually lags the nation's. Yet not just any workers can fill high-tech posts: These jobs demand skills that often take years of training and education to acquire.

Focusing on education in the long run - and on retraining over the more medium term - are both crucial goals for policy-makers concerned about the local labor market. What this region needs immediately, however, is a more flexible approach to work-force development.

Too often, work-force development resources go only to help people with few skills climb up to the lowest rung on the job ladder, or to help displaced workers retrain for different jobs.

At least some federal, state and county work-force development money should be dedicated to recruiting job candidates who have the skills currently in demand in Northeast Ohio, but who live elsewhere.

Groups like BioEnterprise and Nortech are starting to talk about how to do that. The plans include using Northeast Ohio's new marketing slogan, Cleveland+, as part of a campaign to hype the region's assets and reasonable cost of living to lure health care, financial and information-technology workers from pricier markets.

Apparently, no legislative or administrative obstacles prevent the use of public money to steal away other regions' top talent.

The sooner that approach can start, the better. If local high-tech companies can't fill their job openings, it could either stunt their growth or prompt them to pick up and move.

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