

Think small If you're searching for a job, small businesses are a good place to look

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"So where are the jobs?"

In today's economic climate, that question has taken on greater urgency. For a growing number of Americans, the answer is simple: Think small.

Just ask Lynne Oldham. Though she has worked for (as she puts it) "mega-companies," she started HR Fundamentals, a human resources consulting and outsource firm that deals with small- and medium-sized companies. Oldham's own Parsippany-based firm, which she founded in 2001, has 12 employees.

For Oldham, smaller companies offer greater opportunities for all the employees. "If you want to make a difference, the small company is the place to do it," she says. "The accountability is there. For folks who want that, who don't want to be just a number, that's very important."

"You have to work harder because there are fewer hands to share the work," Oldham says. "But rewards come with that. You have the chance to be more creative, more inventive and more hard-working."

At smaller businesses, employees tend to gain hands-on experience sooner, says Christopher Aiello, senior partner with the law firm of Aiello, Harris & Schiffman, P.C., which has offices in Watchung, Bridgewater, Springfield and Florham Park.

"You have the opportunity to gain court experience right out of the gate," says Aiello, whose firm has nine attorneys. "You're supervised, of course, but you're able to get that experience more rapidly than you might at a larger firm."

Over a decade ago, signs indicated that small business would reign. The prediction was clearly on target. U.S. Census figures show that out of nearly 21 million businesses in the United States in 1999, only 98,087 had more than 100 employees.

Most people don't think of the other 99 percent of businesses, because they're not big household names that you read about. Yet, when you do the math, these small businesses are the biggest creators of jobs in the country.

Even in the past five years, prospective employees have shifted their attention to smaller companies in larger numbers, according to Greg Antonelle, recruiting director for AimHire Associates, a temporary and permanent recruiting firm with offices in Warren, Bedminster and Clinton.

"Five years ago, I would say 10 percent of our placements were in small businesses," says Antonelle. "Today, more than 30 percent are small companies."

Prospective employees find that small can be beautiful for a number of reasons. Antonelle points out that smaller companies can be more flexible in terms of assignments and work hours. They often foster a greater sense of camaraderie.

"In a way, it's like looking for a college," Antonelle observes. Whereas some people feel more comfortable in a larger school with more resources, others prefer the intimacy and individual attention they receive at a smaller school.

Small companies have also demonstrated somewhat more stability in recent years, Antonelle continues. "A larger company may hire 75 people at a time, but with mergers and downsizing, those jobs are often the first to go. A small company may only have one or two openings at a time, but those jobs are often more secure."

These smaller businesses are in various sectors. Some industries have a larger concentration of small businesses than others. A recent Fortune magazine ranking of America's fastest growing small companies listed 19 technology firms, 18 financial, 16 health care, 13 industrial and 12 energy companies.

Sixteen businesses run the gamut ... from gourmet pasta maker and socially conscious coffee roaster, to toys and sporting goods producer and stocker of casino slot machines.

Fortune's list of 100 fastest growing companies put 4Kids Entertainment at No. 1. And this toy licensor company only has 119 employees.

The Fortune ranking, by the way, is based on stock performance and earnings and revenue growth over the past three years. There are many other small companies that are not public.

In addition to this trend of small business domination, you should also look at the statistics that show which business sectors are ramping up their hiring.

For instance, according to a survey by Manpower Inc., companies in manufacturing, transportation and public utilities, wholesale and retail trades, finance, insurance and real estate, construction, services and public administration plan to add employees.

Manufacturing leads the pack with the services sector following a close second. The National Federation of Independent Business says manufacturing business activity rose for the fifth straight month, according to the Institute for Supply Management.

Manpower's Employment Outlook Survey reports that of the nearly 16,000 firms interviewed, 27 percent plan to put up Help Wanted signs in the third quarter, compared to 21 percent in the second quarter.

And while you're looking at statistics and the way things seem to be headed, don't stop there. In today's global economy, many jobs are available outside the United States ... from Nepal to the Netherlands and Austria to Argentina.

A new source for finding these jobs is the "International Job Finder" (Planning/Communications), by Daniel Lauber and Kraig Rice. You'll find 1,200 of the best online and print resources for discovering jobs worldwide. Positions can range from those at nonprofit organizations and pharmaceutical firms to jobs in education or engineering.

However, potential employees should be wary of joining companies that are relatively new or depend heavily on only one or two clients, Antonelle warns.

"Over the past two years, we saw a lot of people leave the large telecommunications and pharmaceutical companies to go with start-up firms, because that was considered the 'hot'

thing to do. We know what happened to most of those start-ups," he says. "If you can, you should find out about the financial status of a company before you join it."

When you look at overall trends, things in this country do seem to be improving. Believe it or not, the pace of corporate layoffs is down about a third from last year. Investment in high tech equipment is starting to come back. Slowly but surely, jobs are being created. You'll want companies to know you exist as opportunities materialize. So now is the time to get busy and throw your hat in the ring.

"Small businesses are what carry the economy," observes Oldham. "When you join a small company, you get in on the ground floor and have the chance to grow with the company."

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