

'Help Wanted' signs go unanswered at some small businesses

August 31 2016, by Joyce M. Rosenberg



In this Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016, photo, Christine Perkins, who owns Pyara Spa and Salons at two locations in the Boston area, poses at a stylist station at her salon in Burlington, Mass. Perkins struggles to find candidates to style hair, do manicures and give massages, in part because some beauty schools in the region have closed. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

Small businesses that can't find the right people to fill their job openings may be suffering from a Great Recession hangover.

Their futile searches may partly reflect a healthier economy—more people have jobs, reducing the pool of applicants and the success rate of broad strategies like online job postings. For some, the challenge is finding staff with very specific technology skills. Changes in the workforce can also make it difficult, especially among younger people who may prefer big cities and have different work goals. Nearly a fifth of [small business owners](#) surveyed by American Express this spring said finding the right staff is their biggest challenge while expanding their companies.

But owners can also make life difficult for themselves. Some hold to inflexible models developed during the recession—like posting complex jobs for relatively low pay—and many candidates say no because they get better offers. Some employers are still trying to hire one person to do the work of two or three, a tactic that might have worked several years ago but not now, says Steve Lindner, CEO of The WorkPlace Group, a recruiting firm based in Florham Park, New Jersey.

"You're asking for way too much versus what you're willing to pay," Lindner says.

The recovering economy helped many entrepreneurs launch companies, but also has made hiring tougher in some areas. Paul Turano's 3-year-old restaurant, Cook, has six openings including a bartender, servers and a sous chef. The Boston area is filled with upscale restaurants like Cook.

"It's frustrating because I don't know how to change it," Turano says. "We've tried agencies, online, back to basics like hanging a sign in our window that says, 'Come join our team.'"



In this Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016, photo, Christine Perkins, who owns Pyara Spa and Salons at two locations in the Boston area, poses at her salon in Burlington, Mass. Perkins struggles to find candidates to style hair, do manicures and give massages, in part because some beauty schools in the region have closed. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

Cook offers incentives like vacation and a [retirement plan](#). But Turano is also up against changing attitudes—many people he interviews decide they don't want to do the hard work a restaurant requires.

The ripple effect from business closures during the recession has also complicated some hiring. Christine Perkins struggles to find candidates to style hair, do manicures and give massages at her two Boston-area spas, Pyara, in part because some beauty schools in the region have closed.

Perkins has other frustrations. She's looking for full-time staffers willing to make a commitment in order to deliver good customer service. She

offers benefits including a 401(k) retirement plan. But she says many younger candidates aren't interested in full-time work, and some tell her they don't want to work more than 10 hours a week.

"We can barely train you and keep you updated, let alone taking care of customers," Perkins says.

Companies in places like San Francisco and Silicon Valley are up against intense competition for workers. GreatUsefulStuff.com, which operates websites selling products for home, office and travel, has had several positions open for three to four months. Two candidates accepted jobs, then said they received better offers elsewhere.

"I had not run into anything quite like that before," says Jeff Block, CEO of the 12-year-old company based in San Francisco. He's considering broadening his search to other cities and allowing new hires to work remotely.



In this Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016, photo, Christine Perkins, right, who owns Pyara Spa and Salons at two locations in the Boston area, applies nail polish for a client at her salon in Burlington, Mass. Perkins struggles to find candidates to style hair, do manicures and give massages, in part because some beauty schools in the region have closed. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

While Block is widening his parameters, other companies may be hurting themselves. Some are too rigid about the type of candidate they're looking for, says Tricia Lucas, owner of Lucas Select, a recruiting company based in Cary, North Carolina.

Lucas' specialty is finding salespeople to sell software to businesses. The greatest demand and shortest supply is for people with five to seven years of experience. There are plenty of more-experienced people, but companies don't want to hire these workers.

"They're trying to control their costs and this is a way they think they can do it," she says. "They think, 'we can fill that seat with somebody cheaper.'"

Many companies also don't want to have to train new hires, recruiter Lindner says. That's often another consequence of the recession, when employers had more candidates to choose from and could turn down those who needed training in order to avoid spending time and money bringing them up to speed.

Owners in a time crunch may not invest the time necessary to find top-notch hires, says Jay Starkman, CEO of Engage PEO, a human resources provider based in Hollywood, Florida. That includes continual networking, talking with as many people as possible to see if they know

of good candidates—including people who have jobs.

"Sending out postings on LinkedIn and some other job boards and expecting that this flood of candidates will come in—those days don't exist anymore," Starkman says.



In this Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2016, photo, Christine Perkins, who owns Pyara Spa and Salons at two locations in the Boston area, poses as clients sit in the foreground, at her salon in Burlington, Mass. Perkins struggles to find candidates to style hair, do manicures and give massages, in part because some beauty schools in the region have closed. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

Not being able to find the right employees is keeping some [small businesses](#) from expanding. Kelly Fitzgerald's public relations company, Breakaway Communications, is perpetually in need of more staffers to promote technology clients.

People with three or four years of experience in technology public relations can be hard to find; many are in jobs they like and aren't moving, Fitzgerald says. She also finds that younger candidates often don't show what qualifications they would offer and instead say, "I think your organization will be good for me."

Fitzgerald has offices in New York and San Francisco with 17 staffers, but would love to have twice that number and be able to say yes to prospective customers.

"Unless we have the right teams, we can't do it," Fitzgerald says.

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