

Staffing agencies can cure employment woes

By Margaret von Steinen

As the nation's economy swings into recovery, businesses are looking to staffing agencies to provide the flexible workforce necessary to increase production of goods and services and to find quality candidates for full-time permanent positions.

Temporary staffing agencies were created during the post-war recovery that followed World War II to satisfy demand for skilled workers in a fast-growing economy. The baby boom surge in pregnancies that followed the soldiers' return from the front also spelled a great loss from the workplace of many "Rosie the Riveters" and women performing secretarial work in American factories and offices.

Patrick Allkins, president CEO of OnStaff USA said the business of his company and others like it has evolved since the middle of the twentieth century from just placing workers in short-term temporary positions to recruiting full-time skilled and professional workers for a wide-range of employers.

Inside today's Best Local Jobs section on pages J4 & J5 you'll find several stories about the personnel services industry that generated more than \$62 billion in revenue in 2003: \$56 billion from temporary help services and \$6 billion in permanent placement services.

"I am very bullish about the economy," said Allkins, a 25-year veteran of the industry. "We're extremely busy filling orders from existing companies, with many running additional shifts. This industry is usually the leading barometer of a recovery."

Staffing services include temporary help, permanent placement, temporary-to-permanent placement, long-term and contract help, managed services (often called "outsourcing"), training, human resources consulting and arrangements in which a staffing firm assumes responsibility for payroll, benefits and other human resource functions. The fastest growth is occurring in professional and technical occupations, according to the United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics.

Allkins said 90 percent of companies utilize temporary help and recruiting services to shape a flexible workforce that often offers temporary and contract workers a bridge to permanent employment.

"Sometimes it is the only way to get into a company," said Allkins, who directs OnStaff USA offices in Portage, Otsego, Battle Creek, Decatur and Dowagiac, "When you let a service or a recruiter do it for you, we make sure it is a good fit for both sides."

Travis Dommert, president of WSI (Workforce Strategies Inc.) Health Division, explained that when you work with a staffing agency, the staffing agency's entire reputation is based on its ability to make good matches. "If either one of the two parties—the employee or the client—is dissatisfied with the bid, its credibility is damaged by making a bad fit or a bad match."

Not only do staffing agencies assist new and unemployed workers in finding jobs, working people seek out their services to try out new careers or to find a better job.

If you realize midway through an assignment that it's not a good fit for you, Dommert said "part of the benefit in working with a staffing agency is that when your assignment ends, we can take that feedback apply it and get you something that you think is more appropriate next time."

“A person can visit one recruiting firm and be exposed to many jobs and companies,” Allkins said. “We are seeing solid growth in Southwest Michigan and there is a good supply of quality workers.”

According to Dommert, the ratio between available job and quality workers is industry specific. “Light industrial, clerical and to some extent educational, there are more candidates than there are positions,” he said. “In health care, it’s just the opposite. “Nurses, physical therapists and pharmacists are in extremely high demand, so we’ll have more openings than we can fill.”

To attract the most qualified employees, Allkins said most staffing services offer highly competitive wages and benefits and that the average temporary or contract worker earns more than \$10 per hour.

“Some earn more than their permanent counterparts,” he said. “Most staffing companies offer health insurance as well as vacation and holiday pay, and many offer retirement plans. Virtually any temporary or contract employee who wants benefits can find a staffing firm that offers them.”

Even part-time employees are eligible for benefits at some staffing agencies. For example, WSI has implemented a program called “Benefits in a Card.” According to Dommert, “It’s essentially affordable health insurance. It gives employees at least some way to get benefits even if they’re working less than full time.”

—Tara Marion contributed to this story.