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### Got skills?

***The future is looking bright for Southwest Michigan manufacturers; companies are 'desperate' to find talented, tech-savvy workers***

By JULIE SWIDWA - H-P Staff Writer

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A year ago, Regal Finishing in Coloma and Lovejoy Inc. in South Haven each predicted they would add workers during 2011.

A year later, both report that their staffs did in fact grow and that they're expecting a repeat performance this year. And results of nationwide 2012 employment outlook surveys indicate they're not alone.

"Last year we increased our workforce by 25 percent, and I would expect similar growth this year before the year is out," said Jim Kodis, owner of Regal Finishing. The company, which puts reflective finishes on plastics, metal and glass, employs 30 people.

Lovejoy, an industry leader in flexible coupling design and development, had 50 workers at its South Haven plant in January 2011, and last week reported having 60 on the payroll. And the company is looking to hire more workers.

"The 10 people we've added since last January is just a start," said Arnold Redsicker, director of business development at Lovejoy. "We're doing really well. Last year domestically was a record year due to the market we're in being heavily oriented toward mining and materials processing, which has not slowed down."

The Manpower Employment Outlook Survey results released in December said the employment outlook for the first quarter of this year shows the most promising hiring expectation since 2008. All four U.S. regions surveyed reported a positive outlook, with employers in the Midwest region reporting the strongest. Fifteen percent of employers in the Midwest said they plan to add permanent jobs in 2012.

In another, smaller survey done by Harris Interactive on behalf of CareerBuilder, which has the nation's largest online job site, 36 percent of employers surveyed said they plan to hire contract and temporary workers this year. The survey included 3,000 hiring managers and human resource professionals across various industries and company sizes.



Don Campbell / H-P staff Jim Dew paints mirror components to Honda Civics Monday at Regal Finishing in Coloma. The company, which puts reflective finishes on plastics, metal and glass, increased its workforce by 25 percent last year, according to Jim Kodis, owner of Regal Finishing. "I



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Of the 18,000 employers canvassed nationwide in the Manpower survey, 14 percent anticipate an increase in staffing levels in the first quarter of the year, 9 percent expect a decrease, 70 percent expect no change and 7 percent are undecided.

The Manpower survey is done quarterly to measure employers' intentions to increase or decrease their number of workers during the next quarter.

In the most recent survey, U.S. employers in 12 of 13 industry sectors said they have a positive outlook, with only construction having a negative outlook. The areas expecting the strongest growth are mining, manufacturing, leisure and hospitality, wholesale and retail trade, and professional and business services.

'Desperate'

Megan McCausland, director of community relations for Michigan Works of Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties, said the work force development organization is focusing its efforts on most of those stronger sectors, along with health care.

"Manufacturing and health care are not just hiring, they're desperate," she said. "Manufacturers are crying out the loudest. They desperately need hardworking people, and desperate is not an exaggeration."

Redsicker said Lovejoy has several job postings with Michigan Works and will work with that organization and Lake Michigan College to set up a training program soon.

"Lovejoy is extremely high on Michigan as a place to do business, especially southwest lower Michigan," said Redsicker, who is vice chairman of the Workforce Development Board, which governs the tri-county Michigan Works agency. He was recently named to Gov. Rick Snyder's Talent Investment Board, which will advise Snyder on work force development.

"Manufacturing has a great future in the U.S. We're just getting restarted," Redsicker said. "The critical issue is going to be skills of the people. We need people with math skills. Where we see the lack here is in math. More broadly in the U.S. it's science, technology, engineering and math, which we call STEM training."

Kodis said Regal Finishing, which has a variety of industries as customers, is awaiting word on three major contracts.

"We figure we'll get at least one of the three, and that will significantly increase our demand (for workers)," he said. "Everything we're seeing from our customers is that the business forecast looks pretty good on the manufacturing side. Another is that over the last few years we've seen people reach retirement age, so the aging workforce is constantly creating new openings."

'Show up and we'll train'

Lyons Industries Inc. in Dowagiac recently added eight manufacturing positions and a sales position, according to part owner Lance Lyons. The company, which makes bathtubs, showers and kitchen sinks for Menards, the RV industry and wholesale and retail businesses in Canada, employs 120 people.

"We're still looking to fill another three or four positions," Lyons said. The recent hiring is due to two things, he said.

"Our busy season is January through April or May, so we're gearing up for that. And the company is growing. It's hard to put a number on it, because as we grow we also get more efficient. But we actually do see things picking up, and 2011 was the second-best year in terms of sales in the company's 40-plus years in business."

Lyons said the company is projecting about 5 percent growth this year.

"But that's what we expected last year, and we got 15 percent," he said.

Lyons said the main qualification to work at Lyons Industries is this: "Show up every day with a good attitude and a willingness to work, and we'll provide the rest. We'll provide the training."

K&M Machine Fabricating in Cassopolis is also hiring.

Chad Heathco, chief financial officer, said K&M has 200 workers and is looking for about 30 more. The company is looking to hire welders, machinists, maintenance mechanics, electronics technicians and industrial painters.

"We're heavily involved in machining and fabricating components for industries such as off-road construction and mining, and a boom in the mining industry is causing a sizeable increase in demand," Heathco said.

He said K&M is projecting 25-40 percent growth for this year.

"In 2011 we saw similar growth, and 2012 is shaping up to be a record year for our organization," Heathco said.

He said that for some jobs, such as welders, his company uses staffing agencies to bring in workers from all over.

"But we have permanent welders too, when we're able to find them. On the machining side, it's all K&M employees," Heathco said.

The role of 'temps'

In many cases, companies are hiring temporary workers through staffing agencies to supplement their staffs while they see

whether business continues to improve.

Eric Gilpin, president of CareerBuilder's Staffing & Recruiting Group, said temporary jobs through staffing agencies are playing an increasingly important role in the nation's economic recovery.

"Our studies have pointed to a rise in these positions post-recession as companies address growing market needs," Gilpin said in a January news release. "Employers are relying on temporary and contract workers to support leaner staffs, and in many cases will transition those workers to permanent roles."

Judee Hopwood, president of Williamson Employment Service Inc., and Cathy Averill, executive vice president of Beacon Staffing and Training, both said their agencies are seeing growth. Williamson has offices in St. Joseph, Niles and Grand Rapids, and Beacon has offices in St. Joseph, Holland and Grand Rapids.

"Typically in staffing this is a slow time of year," Hopwood said in an interview in late January. "We're not experiencing any slowdown. We're seeing growth. There's a lot of uncertainty in the economy, and employers want to fill positions they've left vacant for a while, and we're a good alternative."

Hopwood said some companies that were pressed to cut costs eliminated payroll and human resources positions and now rely on staffing agencies to recruit and screen people and address personnel issues.

"We try not to use the word 'temp' or 'temporary,' because we act as a full employer. We provide the unemployment insurance, workers' compensation and taxes, and medical insurance is available from the first day they work," she said.

Averill said job placements at Beacon were up 25-30 percent from 2010 to 2011, and she anticipates another 10-15 percent increase in 2012. She said that while temporary hiring is up, she's also seeing a lot more places starting to hire for full-time, permanent positions.

"Companies that pared down to the bare bones are realizing they can't continue so lean because they're burning out their full-time people. We're cautiously optimistic. I'm very pleased to see growth in all our offices," Averill said. "We're excited because we know the temporary staffing industry is a barometer for what's coming."

She said in late January her office in St. Joseph had 30-45 open orders in manufacturing and was having a hard time finding good, qualified people with good work histories and clean backgrounds.

"Even though unemployment is still high, there aren't tons of good, qualified people. We have to really drill down to get our clients the best people," she said.

"Employers are looking for people who have been working, not just sitting home. Even if people haven't been working in their field, employers are very understanding about that. They're not so understanding about the ones who have been sitting home for two years."

#### Help wanted

Rocky Genovese, owner of Comfort Keepers in St. Joseph, said his company is almost always hiring and has a hard time finding people. The company matches caregivers with senior citizens for help ranging from one hour to 24-hour shifts.

"It's always a challenge to find the right employees. We can never seem to find enough to satisfy the need," Genovese said. "I think a lot of people are collecting unemployment, and there's no incentive to work. It's easier to sit at home and collect unemployment."

Employment with Comfort Keepers is "a very rewarding job, a job you feel good about at the end of the day, but it can also be very demanding with some of the challenges with some of our seniors," Genovese said.

"And it can be emotionally draining. When our clients pass away or get put in nursing homes, it's very hard on our caregivers."

Genovese said he's had the Comfort Keepers franchise in St. Joseph for 11 years, and "I don't recall having a time when we weren't hiring."

The organization employs 150 people and is looking for six to eight more, he said. The challenge, Genovese said, is to find people to serve the New Buffalo, Union Pier and Bridgman areas.

"I have a stack of worker applications from Benton Harbor, but the challenge is to find people in the outlying areas."

Genovese explained that, with the high cost of gasoline, someone from Benton Harbor might not make enough money working with a client in the southwest corner of the county.

"It's frustrating as a business owner, seeing the despair that goes on in Benton Harbor and the politics involved. We see it firsthand with all the unemployment and all the applications we get, but there's nothing you can do about it."

He said drug testing and background checks are a problem for some people.

"I think they avoid us, because word gets around that we do drug testing right on site, so that weeds them out pretty quickly," he said.

#### Predicting the future

McCausland said the challenge for work force development organizations like Michigan Works is to predict correctly where job growth will be and provide the right training.

A Michigan Works career guide for the tri-county area is based on labor market projections through 2016. The areas of focus in the career guide are advanced manufacturing, health care, energy and skilled trades and hospitality.

"We're working closely with M-TEC to see that they're offering a curriculum that gives people the skills companies are looking for," McCausland said. "We're working with employers and the college to make sure our trainings are timely. We serve as a link to complete the process."

She said that with health care being a strong area, several training sessions will be offered this year for certified nursing assistants.

"We're also going to start building a strong customer service component into our trainings. Great customer service is important to the hospitality industry," she said.

McCausland said Michigan Works is working with Harbor Shores to fill 25-30 hospitality positions by mid-February.

The people hired will work in the new golf course clubhouse opening in April, she said.

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racinrack wrote on Feb 5, 2012 4:55 PM:

" While some of these places are hiring,some wont hire you if you have a job already.Some people are working right now,to make ends meet till they get hired for a better position but unless they are un-employed,they have little chance of getting a better job.This maybe from the employers getting a tax break for hiring unemployed workers,not real sure on why but I do know that places are hiring,not paying the greatest but it is still a job. "

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