

Turn job loss into opportunity

If the job you want isn't there, try creative approach

By TODD McADAM
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Susan Harkness knew when she was laid off in March she'd have to make a few lifestyle adjustments. She didn't count on the chickens.

Harkness went from managing databases at a Binghamton technology company to professional gardening, produce delivery and chicken ranching in a one-woman, home-based business called Susie's Bloomers.

"Our lives have changed so much," Harkness said this week. "I never had to worry about taking care of 40 chickens."

She doesn't mind. In fact, she enjoys it. But for every Susan Harkness in Broome and Tioga counties, hundreds of people are working harder and longer just to find a job to work long and hard at.

And many of those jobs are in areas in which the laid off manufacturers have no background. Health-care remains a high-need field. Food, lodging or clerical jobs traditionally are not well-paying, but numerous. The high-tech areas of computers and engineering remain strong, with 240 openings in Broome, Tioga and Chenango counties, but using and designing high-tech devices isn't the same as making them.

Manufacturing is a major weak point. Where more than 100 openings existed a few months ago, this week there were just 35.

A database maintained by the state Department of Labor shows 1,126 job openings in Broome and Tioga counties where more than 2,000 were listed just eight months ago. State figures show 1,000 more people looking for work than last March.

"We're feeling the brunt of the cutbacks in the telecommunications industry," said Joseph Kozlowski, a regional analyst with the state Department of Labor.

■ Broome and Tioga counties lost 1,900 manufacturing jobs in the past year, the worst October drop since 1992-93, when 3,200 manufacturing jobs disappeared.

■ In the Binghamton metropolitan area this year, Flextronics closed a plant and eliminated 475 jobs; Sanmina in Owego cut at least 140. Lockheed Martin Systems Integration in Owego let go 40, IBM Endicott let 200 temporary workers go, Sheldahl in Endicott cut 42 workers.

■ Just this week, Universal Instruments Corp. in Kirkwood announced 250 layoffs, its fifth and most severe cut this year, bringing to 630 the number of cuts, most of them in Broome County.

Knowing she's not alone doesn't make Jeane Roby's life any easier. She was one of the first to go when Flextronics began shutting its plant last summer. She has years of experience as a test engineer.

But after five months of pounding the pavement, applying to colleges and hoping for someone, anyone, to call back about her application, the health-care industry is beginning to look pretty good.

"My unemployment is about to run out, so I'm about to get desperate," Roby said this week. "I'm very tempted to do a few bedpans."

At least bedpan-changing is in a growing employment sector. The Labor Department reported 213 health-care openings in Broome, Tioga and Chenango counties last week. The problem is Roby and hundreds of other laid-off workers have no training or experience in health-care.

Roby wants to go into teaching. "I love learning, and working with children," she said. "I just want to get away from manufacturing."

Roby is taking the right approach, said Tom Egan, owner of Craftsmen Mobility Systems in Binghamton. Two of the manufacturing openings listed on the state database are with his company — which designs and makes devices to help disabled people get into and use motor vehicles. His suggestion to anybody trying to work through a decline in manufacturing is to find a new approach.



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Susan Harkness of Susie's Bloomers feeds her 40 chickens. Harkness started her own egg/produce

basket delivery business after being laid-off from a info-tech company.



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Susan Harkness of Susie's Bloomers readies a trunk full of her fresh produce harvest baskets for delivery.

Job opportunities may require creative thinking —

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"What businesses in the Southern Tier need to do is look at what the country needs," Egan said, and workers need to do the same. "Does it make sense for the U.S. to produce heavy industry anymore? No."

That's why he likes Harkness' new business and even has friends who use it. Rather than struggle through a downtime, Egan likes the fact that Harkness made her own opportunity.

For \$15 a week, Harkness fills a basket with fresh produce and eggs from her chickens, supplementing them with recipes and tips on how to cook the vegetables. The business grew so fast that her 4,000-square-foot garden was soon stripped bare, and Harkness had to go to other local growers. Now she hand-picks produce from area wholesalers.

"My being laid off was actually a good thing," Harkness said. "Everyone likes having me home, except maybe my daughter, who thinks I'm home a bit too much."

Patrick Doyle, executive director of the Broome-Tioga Workforce Development Board, likes Harkness' inventiveness. And for unemployed people who are willing to try something new, if not actually start a new business, job centers in Binghamton, Glendale and Owego

WHERE THE JOBS ARE

Here are the job categories with the greatest number of openings in Broome, Tioga and Chenango counties:

1. **Health** — 213
2. **Food, lodging** — 155
3. **Clerical** — 138
4. **Engineering, architecture** — 124
5. **Computer, information technology** — 116

can help with skills training.

"But at the same time, that's not for everyone," he said. "At the same time we talk about retraining, we have to aggressively pursue new businesses."

Healthcare is one industry to examine, he said. "Nationally, healthcare is going to be a growing industry. People are aging everywhere," Doyle said. "That's an opportunity."

It's an opportunity best taken now, said Randy Wiley, economist and senior vice president at BSB Bank & Trust. "In terms of manufacturing, I don't have a crystal ball, but I don't think that will be returning."

Egan's business combines a variety of job sectors — manufacturing and healthcare primarily. He got the idea 16 years ago, when the booth for his van customization business was next to a healthcare booth.

He realized that just about any shop could customize a van, but nobody was making and installing wheelchair lifts and other devices to help disabled people drive.

Soon after, he took it a step further. Full-sized vans are expensive, and if he could find a way to adapt smaller vehicles for disabled people's needs, he could make a killing. "What I had to offer is ingenuity, engineering and problem solving," Egan said.

Today, he employs 10 people producing products nationally under the Access Unlimited brand. He hired two people this week and is looking for two or three more. His orders outnumber his production capability by a factor of 4-to-1.

He needs two things to add 50 more people in the next couple years: \$4 million or so in venture capital and 50 people.

And he may get his opportunity, if Wiley is right. Low energy costs, low interest rates and government incentives to induce spending will combine to help pull America out of the recession it's sliding into. And that will help people like Roby get back to work.

"The cumulative effect of fiscal stimuli is going to be huge," Wiley said. "It's just a matter of where and when."