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THE Times Herald

Montgomery County's Newspaper

206th Year, No. 329

www.TimesHerald.com | AllAroundPhilly.com

Tuesday, May 9, 2006

For home delivery, call 610-272-1720

50 cents

Time for an image upgrade

Recruitment techniques tailored as construction industry seeks employees

By **CARL ROTENBERG**
Times Herald Staff

PLYMOUTH — The construction industry apparently has an image problem.

When you think about construction, does a "Bubba" character come to mind?

The overweight, sweaty builder who has a toolbelt tugging his pants south?

Or do you think about "Suzy," the college-educated project estimator, "George," a black carpenter/trainee drafted by a union training program and "Jonathan," a young, just-out-of-vocational school worker?

If "Bubba" is still your first thought, the construction industry will have trouble recruiting young people, women and minorities to fill the more than a million new jobs expected in the industry between 2002 and 2012.

More than 100 construction managers, trainers and industry experts met last Tuesday at the Plymouth Country Club to address the construction industry's image problem and potential solutions.

Associated Builders and Contractors, Southeast Pennsylvania Chapter; the Montgomery County Department of Economic and Workforce Development; Penn State Abington; the Montgomery County Workforce Investment Board; and the Montgomery County Industrial Development Corp. sponsored the Construction Industry Education Summit.

"We need to do a better job educating our guidance counselors and parents," said Bob Herbein, senior vice president of corporate services at American Infrastructure of Worcester. "We are a changing industry that relies on new technologies and needs people with management skills."

Herbein believes the day when the construction industry needed "Bubba" to unload trucks and carry lumber has passed.

"We need to attract new people to the industry," he said.

High technology skills, interpersonal skills to manage workers and advanced mathematics and engineering skills were rated highly by Herbein, a Millersville University graduate with a degree in industrial technology.

A group brainstorming session on recruiting and the construction industry's image problem yielded dozens of suggestions.

One table of industry veterans suggested using job shadowing prior to high school, "alumni" testimonials to boost the industry image and recruiting military veterans into the construction industry.

Another group emphasized that not all industry jobs are "down and dirty." Recruiting messages should be tailored

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IMAGE

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to individual audiences — high school, minority or female groups of potential recruits.

Dynamic speakers and an armed-forces style of marketing plan were recommended to boost employment.

The American construction industry currently employs more than nine million workers.

The Internet was suggested to market the industry to young people along with industry partnerships with school guidance counselors and parents to attract new recruits.

The construction industry will encounter some major obstacles to boosting recruitment. They include a mobile American society, a lack of licensing and a need for training certifications.

Worker safety was discussed by Scott Shimandle, an OSHA compliance assistance officer. Job safety for youth is a priority for OSHA because there are an average of 200,000 injuries to youth each year and 70 fatal deaths, he said.

Falls from ladders and roofs are the chief cause.

Gerald Birkelbach, executive director of Montgomery County Economic and Workforce Development, was upbeat about the national economy and Montgomery County's future prospects.

Since June 2003, the national unemployment rate has decreased from 6.3 to 4.7 percent with more than five million net new jobs created in the U.S. Construction jobs, health, professional, educational and retail jobs accounted for most of the job increases, he said.

Montgomery County has 26,600 businesses with 480,000 jobs, a stable manufacturing base and an unemployment rate of 3.7 percent (compared to the national average of 4.7 percent).

The county's population has increased 13 percent, from 1990 to 2004, to 774,029. Median family income in Montgomery County was \$72,183, compared to \$49,184 in Pennsylvania.

Leading industries in Montgomery County are health care, biotechnology, information and communication, business and financial services and retail. Health care accounts for 13.9 percent of the Montgomery County workforce. Average earnings in the field are \$42,526.

The Biotechnology indus-

try, typified by the presence of Merck & Co. Inc., GlaxoSmithKline and Johnson & Johnson in Montgomery County, accounts for 5.7 percent of the county's workforce. Average annual earnings in the field are \$82,828.

Carl Rotenberg can be reached at crotenberg@timesherald.com or 610-272-2500, ext. 350.

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