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Ex-Mainers Get a Call to Come Home

Recruiters search for candidates with ties to the state to fill jobs in a tight labor market

BY JON KAMP

Employers and recruiters looking to fill positions in Maine are scouring the U.S. for people who once lived in the northern New England state in hopes work will coax them back.

With the state's unemployment rate hovering at 3.5%, near record lows, the labor market is tight, particularly in the southern part of the state near Portland, Maine's largest city with 67,000 residents.

Although the state known as "Vacationland" draws tourists to its coastal hamlets and rugged wilderness, it can be harder to convince outsiders to actually live there, recruiters say. Maine doesn't have a deep roster of major companies, lacks a large city and has notoriously harsh winters.

To improve his odds at finding a good candidate, recruiter Ed McKersie, who runs Portland staffing firm Pro Search Inc., looks on social-media sites such as LinkedIn to identify ex-Mainers and graduates from Maine colleges who might be convinced to return to their old stamping ground.

"They know what it's like here, they have an affinity," said Mr. McKersie. He said the key is to show ex-Mainers that the state has more available jobs than they may think.

With roughly 1.3 million residents, Maine is among the smaller U.S. states by population. But there are also nearly a half-million people who were born in Maine scattered throughout the country, according to U.S. Census data.

The state has thus far invested \$100,000 in an organization Mr. McKersie launched in 2015 called Live and Work in Maine, which



Jay Dearborn, left, was recruited to return to Maine to work as vice president of strategy for WEX Inc. in South Portland.

aims to convert visitors into residents by linking them to employment opportunities.

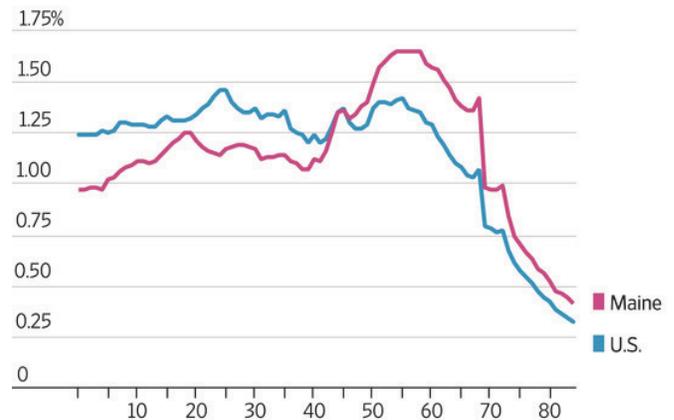
The website added job boards last year that include roughly 300 active employers, Mr. McKersie said. The organization is using social media ads and partnerships with colleges to seek former Mainers, he said.

Authorities in Maine are also concerned about the need to offset older workers retiring. The state's median age was 44.6 years in 2016, highest in the nation, according to U.S. Census estimates. Retaining and recruiting younger workers is personal for Republican Gov. Paul LePage: His 28-year-old son left Maine for a job in Florida, his spokesman said.

Mr. LePage is pushing for a \$100 million bond program

Gray Maine

In the nation's oldest state, many people are set to age out of the workforce. Share of the population by age, 2015:



Source: Maine Department of Labor

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aimed at helping young people accelerate the payment of student loans, provided they work in the state for five years. This would build on an earlier tax-credit program aimed at students started before he took office.

“Retaining young Mainers and attracting those who have left the state is definitely a goal, and the governor’s policies are aimed at encouraging them to come home,” the spokesman said.

A recent state survey showed that employers had 31,000 job openings in September, nearly 5% of the nonfarm payroll jobs in the state at that time, said Glenn Mills, chief economist in the Maine labor department’s Center for Workforce Research. Three-quarters of responding employers said the jobs were difficult to fill.

Anecdotally, jobs in information technology and health appear particularly hard to staff, said Quincy Hentzel, chief executive at the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce.

The extra effort to lure workers to Maine is a sign of the times as companies look for workers to fill skilled positions amid low unemployment nationally. The U.S. jobless rate was 4.4% in June, around a level that indicates nearly everyone looking for a job has one.

Other hard-sell locales are also trying to keep young people at home and tempt back those who moved away. Detroit has hosted annual confabs to show off the city to successful natives who live elsewhere.

Similar events are in the works in Cleveland and in Erie, Pa. And lawmakers in Connecticut have proposed a tax credit for college graduates to stay put.



Dearborn and his wife, Nisha, son, Kiran, 3, and daughter, Kavya, 5, stand on the Eastern Promenade in Portland, Maine. Dearborn said that when he lived in the New York area, he made friends through work or socially, but has been able to find a real community since moving to Maine. PHOTO: YOON S. BYUN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Scouring LinkedIn, Facebook Pays Off

Idexx Laboratories Inc., a veterinary-health company with roughly 2,500 local employees, has been hunting for job candidates with connections to Maine, said Giovanni Twigge, the chief human resources officer.

The search has included looking for clues on social media, including Facebook and LinkedIn.

“Maine is not on everybody’s radar,” Mr. Twigge said. “The sale was very difficult when people didn’t know

Maine.”

Idexx found its director of software research and development, Alan Boucher, because his LinkedIn profile listed his location as both Northern California and Maine. He and his wife bought a small Maine cottage in 2011 as a vacation home, and after Idexx offered him a job, they moved across country permanently with their grade-school-age daughter four years later.

Mr. Boucher, a Connecticut native, said he and his wife were already drawn to the small-town feel and pace of life. They now live in the coastal town of Kennebunkport.

“It was a both a great opportunity and a great outcome for our family,” he said.

Jay Dearborn left Maine for college in Pennsylvania 20 years ago and moved back to the state last year. Working as a principal for McKinsey & Co. and living in Princeton, N.J., Mr. Dearborn met Melissa Smith, the chief executive of Maine-based payment-processing firm Wex Inc. at a lunch event. Ms. Smith helped persuade the 38-year-old to return home with his family, he said.

“There is something about the place and the people that gets in your bones,” he said.

—Jon Kamp