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Help!

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It's a jungle out there. Orders are pouring in faster than your company can fill them. You're losing sales every day because you can't find new workers to step up output. You're not even sure you can hold on to your present employees; competitors are dangling offers in front of them. You need help--talented, experienced help, if possible--fast. So, boss, what do you do?

In the booming '90s, the answer is: everything you possibly can. Advertise in any way you know how, including skywriting. Don't forget the Internet; if your company doesn't have a home page, get one quick. Scout the "job fairs" popping up around the country, created for desperate people like you, or organize a fair of your own. And tell your campus recruiters to make their offers to top engineers, computer programmers and chemists more like the deals sports teams shower on athletes--including signing bonuses. Says Jim Bretl, director of the career-services center at Marquette University in Milwaukee: "It's much like the NBA."

Well, maybe not quite the way a National Basketball Association team would go after Michael Jordan. But if you're a manager in the American Hiring League, you are looking for employees in the hottest U.S. economy in 28 years, and you're going to have to wheel and deal, beg, borrow and steal--however and wherever you can--to find the help you need. Not since 1970, when the Vietnam War and a guns-and-butter economy created a huge demand for skilled manpower, has there been a tougher time to expand the corporate work force, especially in the high-tech industries of the "new economy."

Labor shortages have indisputably become a major drag on the continuing boom. In a survey of 441 "trendsetter" companies released in April by Coopers & Lybrand, a large accounting and consulting firm, almost 70% reported that they were having trouble finding skilled workers. More than a quarter

were decreasing growth estimates, delaying or canceling expansion plans and overhiring--or trying to--in anticipation of a still tighter job market. Bear in mind that these companies were chosen for the survey because over the past five years they had been among the fastest-growing businesses in the country.

Nor is much relief in sight, even if the U.S. unemployment rate rises a bit from its 28-year low of 4.3%. In Austin, Texas, for example, the national rate is quite irrelevant. Unemployment there is officially 2.3%, and Steve Mays, director of a suburban grocery store, says only half-jokingly that it "is really minus 1.7%," given the "cannibalism" of employers' swiping workers from one another.

Anything involving computers is in great demand now--not just the arts of programming and software designing either. Almost anybody who works in an office must use a personal computer. A hotel clerk, for example, has to know not only how to click a mouse but also which hotel operations a computer can speed up and how. What is hot now, says Allan Kolber, chief enterprise architect at New Jersey-based technical-services provider Butler International, is people who know data warehousing and business-process re-engineering. Anyone who can deal with changes in the formatting of data, or "the domain change" as it is referred to in the high-tech world, says Kolber, "can write his or her own ticket."

But shortages are also appearing in the least-skilled jobs. "You drive around and every fast-food restaurant has a HELP WANTED sign hanging in the window," observes Jack Kyser, chief economist at the Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. Such signs also decorate the grocery stores, clothing boutiques and delicatessens filling strip malls across the continent. Not only are high sales creating many new jobs, but employee turnover is enormous. At these levels, says Mitchell Fromstein, CEO of Manpower Inc., the world's largest provider of temporary help, job experience, even the briefest exposure to hamburger flipping, is almost as sought after as a college degree in more skilled occupations. An employee who works a month or so at, say, a grocery-checkout counter and demonstrates he or she will at least show up on time can often move quickly to a better-paying job.

Surprisingly, though, many employers are not yet exploring new ways of finding help. Take the 300 financial, high-tech, manufacturing and management-consulting firms surveyed by Select Appointments North America, a company based in Woburn, Mass., that supplies workers to many industries. Four-fifths of the firms thought they could increase sales if they could find as many skilled workers as they wanted; 10% believed they could double revenues. Yet fewer than a third plan new training programs, and only 14% advertise on the Internet. "The skill gap is causing a lot of the companies to lose a lot of money," marvels Nicholas Lento, chief operating officer of Select Appointments, but "not a lot of them are really going outside the box" to find people.

That creates opportunity--a little, anyway--for companies that do go outside the box. Some of the areas in which a little creative thinking helps:

RECRUITING Running newspaper help-wanted ads and contacting employment agencies are nowhere near enough these days. More and more companies are turning to job fairs, where firms set up booths to tout opportunities to anyone who wanders by. Advance Micro Devices plugged an April fair in Austin in radio ads for weeks in advance, then set up a big tent to supply job information for those who wandered in while local disk jockeys played music to amuse those waiting in line. The fair was "wildly successful," and AMD hired 30 people. IBM set up recruiting tables in March in Panama City, Fla., where thousands of college students were partying on spring break. David Hofrichter, a managing director of Hay Group, a global management-consulting firm, notes that companies no longer tell recruiters dispatched to job fairs, "If you see some people, let us know." Now, he says, the message is, "You'd better come back with 25 people."

ADVERTISING ON THE INTERNET This "is almost a requirement" for anyone seeking computer-literate employees, says Ken Dean, staffing manager for an Ericsson Inc. telecommunications facility in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park. Not only students but also many current workers who wonder whether they might find a better job elsewhere regularly surf the Web on their PCs to see what is available.

PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEES They are not looking only at salary and benefits either, as the Minnesota High Technology Council, with more than 600 corporate members, realizes. The council has put up billboards along California highways. One pictures a lush forest and proclaims: "In Silicon Valley this is a park. In Minnesota, it's a yard." Those driving by are invited to click onto a Web page where they can find information on Minnesota real estate costs and school systems, and on how much more a given salary will buy in Minnesota than in California.

Many companies are asking their current workers to turn part-time recruiters by offering bonuses and sometimes other perks to those who bring in hireable candidates. At SRA International, a Virginia computer-software firm, any employee who finds a new worker gets \$1,000, plus a chance in a company lottery. Prizes include the choice of a BMW Roadster, a Mercury Mountaineer or a Volvo sedan and an all-expenses-paid cruise for a family of four.

TRAINING Company managers grouse endlessly about how few job seekers have the skills they need. Colleges, for example, are currently granting degrees in computer sciences to barely 25% of the number of people industry wants to hire. And new skill sets are in demand because of what

Hofrichter of Hay Group calls "almost another industrial revolution." He explains that companies in their quest to become lean and mean have combined old jobs and put together work teams to the point that they no longer look for narrow skills but instead for workers who can do what used to be two or three jobs.

Some companies are going beyond griping to the logical next step, which is to hire willing and adaptable people and train them in the particular combination of skills they as employers require. "We are hiring out of nontraditional sources--community colleges, vocational schools, high school graduates who don't plan to go to college--and training for entry-level positions," reports George Newstrom, vice president of Electronic Data Systems, a company with 70,000 employees in the U.S.

Milwaukee-based Manpower Inc. offers free training in many skills to almost anyone who asks. The company, says CEO Fromstein, realized early that it could capitalize on the labor shortage by supplying clients with the trained and adaptable workers that the firms could not find on their own. Coopers & Lybrand is one of many employers "doing a lot more with internships," says James Lafond, a Washington-area managing partner. Internships offer training to young people while giving them and the company a chance to size one another up.

Some executives are going to school themselves to help teach--and help teachers teach--future employees. Doug Whitley, president of Ameritech Illinois, is chairman of the Education to Careers committee of the Mayor's Workforce Board in Chicago. It brings businessmen, teachers and administrators together to plan curriculums that will prepare students for the jobs employers need to fill. It also brings teachers into offices and plants to observe firsthand what their students need to learn. "You'd be amazed how ill prepared the schools were," says Whitley.

SCOUTING Employers willing to look beyond the kinds of people they usually hire can often find good workers. Some are asking retirees if they would consider working part-time; others are luring mothers of young children back to the work force early by helping with day care. The Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates energy companies, has even helped set up a training course for oil-field workers in a West Texas prison.

John Sullivan, an executive of the Houston-based Randalls supermarket chain, was pondering how on earth to staff a new grocery in Austin, when an airplane seatmate thanked him for hiring his 16-year-old son. That gave Sullivan an idea: take on 14- and 15-year-olds, pitching the jobs to parents as a way to keep kids out of trouble while they learn the work ethic. Federal law allows the youths to work no more than 18 hours a week during the school year, 30 in the summer. Nonetheless, enough young teens have put in enough hours--at \$5.50 each, about 7% above the minimum wage--to keep

the store humming, earn some pocket money and learn what holding a job is like. "It's cool," says Matthew Ruiz, 14.

In the high-tech arena, employers are bringing into the U.S. as many foreign computer specialists and other technicians as they can. But by law only 65,000 special visas can be issued annually to such workers during a government fiscal year, which runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30, and all visas for fiscal 1998 were snapped up by the first week in May. Estimates are that those for fiscal 1999 will be gone by next February. Bills to increase the quota have been introduced in the House and the Senate, but some employers are apprehensive about ever being able to import enough workers and are moving to shift more operations overseas where the workers are. "To fill the void that is here right now, we are moving work to Europe, to Ireland, to India, to South America, where there are highly educated work forces available," says Newstrom of Electronic Data Systems, which already employs 40,000 people outside the U.S.

CUSTOM TAILORING Surprisingly, perhaps, few employers mention raising salaries as a means of luring or retaining workers. Top dollar is important, of course, but many job seekers--and job hoppers--are looking for something more. But what? A job that is interesting and offers a pleasant atmosphere and a chance to fulfill individual needs while having--yes, people say it out loud these days--some fun.

Thus many companies are trying to fit the job to the worker as well as the worker to the job. Some will allow valued employees to devise flexible schedules or work from home via computer. SRA International offers employees a choice of benefit programs tailored to individual needs. It is also considering shortening staff members' commutes by opening additional offices in the Washington area. Employees could work at the one closest to home.

Litronic Inc., a company based in Irvine, Calif., that designs Internet-based security systems for companies and government agencies, relies heavily on a relaxed atmosphere to lure and keep employees in competition with bigger electronic neighbors. Many employers now approve of casual dress not only on Fridays but all week as well; Litronic goes further and supplies denim shirts with the company logo. It also goes in for fun and games, literally. Employees enjoy weekly "Nerf wars" and volleyball matches, along with regular company lunches. And, says vice president Chandra Shah, after some employees put in many hours staging an East Coast show for clients, "we had a masseuse come in" to rub away their aches and pains.

Though employers have adopted many of these stratagems out of desperation, it would probably be a mistake to think they can be abandoned when the inevitable economic slowdown comes. The raw

numbers of people looking for employment vs. job openings may match up slightly better. But technology changes so rapidly that there will probably be a scarcity of people versed in the very latest techniques for a long time to come. And workers now being wooed by many employers will not easily get over the idea that they can pick and choose. To convince them otherwise might require not just a slowdown but a deep slump. Even the people most frustrated in their search for the employees they need are not going to pray for that.

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