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HEADLINE: Suburban Employers Seek Urban Workers; Job Fair Matches Supply, Demand

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BODY:

So many job seekers are like Myra Walker, living in the city without a car. So many employers are like Frank Hearl Jr. of the Dulles Airport Marriott, based in a suburb where nearly everybody already has a job.

A job fair yesterday in the Reeves Center, at 14th and U streets NW, brought together people like Walker and Hearl in an attempt to solve a problem faced by the region for decades: Most new jobs are in the suburbs, while most of the unemployed are in the city.

More than 650 applicants from the city, where unemployment is 6 percent, showed up for about 500 jobs in the Dulles corridor, where unemployment is less than 1.5 percent. Putting city job seekers in touch with suburban recruiters was only part of the plan, since even when District residents know of work outside the Capital Beltway, many have no way of getting there. So the job fair was timed to coincide with Monday's start of a Metro bus route between L'Enfant Plaza and Dulles International Airport. The buses are to run hourly from 5:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m., seven days a week, with fares of \$ 1.10 each way.

"I just felt like it was a blessing," said Walker, 38, who lives in Petworth and was looking for a customer service position. "If the jobs are in Virginia, it's a good thing they come here to recruit."

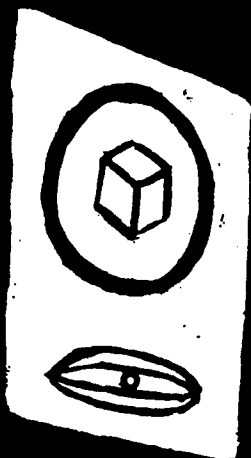
The turnout surpassed the expectations of the fair's sponsors, which included Metro and city agencies responsible for transportation, employment and human services. Eight employers from the Dulles corridor attended, offering positions in security, hospitality, food service, maintenance, transportation, shipping and technology. Several ran out of application forms early in the seven-hour fair and had to photocopy more.

"Job opportunities exist in abundance in the suburbs," said D.C. Council member David Catania (R-At Large), who championed legislation for the city to support the bus line with \$ 750,000. "This is a short-term solution until opportunities are created in the city."

Hearl, director of personnel for Marriott in the Dulles and Fairfax areas, said Marriott recruiters handed out more than 200 applications and interviewed more than 100 people. "It's hard to find people in our neck of the woods," he said. Before, "if this [city] labor pool wanted to go out in that area, they had no way to get there."

Ed Ross, a human resources specialist with Chantilly-based Argenbright Security, said he had never seen a suburban job fair achieve such turnout. He said he attended yesterday's fair because "we're not getting a flow [of applicants] from the inner city. Hopefully, we can get those people."

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jobs? To find out, we and our colleagues asked employers about the tasks they want entry-level workers to perform.

Their responses tell a sobering story. Half of all entry-level jobs in our survey required workers to talk to customers, read instructions of at least a paragraph, do arithmetic, or work with computers every day. With the exception of computer use, this is true for all occupational groups, even the lowest-paid category of job — service workers. Harry Holzer, who directed the study's telephone survey and is now Chief Economist for the U.S. Department of Labor, has found that the frequency with which these tasks are used is even higher in the central city, as compared to the suburbs and other smaller cities within the metro area.

Employers are also looking for fairly significant credentials for entry-level workers. A high school diploma is required for approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the available jobs; general or specific experience is sought for about the same fraction. In the city of Boston, for example, 80 percent of entry-level jobs require a high school diploma, 78 percent require general experience, and 81 percent call for references.

This new emphasis on credentials and "hard skills," such as reading and math, seems to have arisen for several reasons. Some employers mentioned new equipment and safety standards in the use of hazardous materials, and new programs that require worker involvement in quality control, all of which can require reading written instructions or keeping written records. Employers also spoke of the need for workers to handle a broader range of tasks, and to possess a more analytical view of how their job fits into the big picture. Secretaries, for instance, are no longer typists but "information managers." And a variety of industry-specific changes call for added skills: for example, according to the director of a Boston agency, home care aides need added technical knowledge because managed care is inducing hospitals to discharge sicker patients.

At the same time, computer use in entry-level jobs rarely involves rocket science. "It takes about ten minutes" to train file clerks to use the computers, one manager reported. A human resources director at a bank commented that she doesn't look for computer familiarity in new hires because "all systems are different." In some cases, computers have actually reduced skill requirements. Most retailers commented that "smart" cash registers have made the cashier's job easier. A data entry supervisor at a consulting firm noted that computers have become easier to use.

Less expected was employers' emphasis on "soft skills," such as the ability to communicate and work with others. In face-to-face interviews, increased demand for soft skills was mentioned more frequently than any of the hard skills, except computer use. Many employers related this to a competitive strategy to win over customers — to make their businesses "a fun place to shop and to work," in the words of one retailer. Managers of retail, service, and clerical workers spoke of the increased need for the skills involved in customer service. "It's becoming more and more important that people have good communication skills and (that) they're people-oriented." Even in a consumer goods factory, the human resources director said that

THE TASKS REQUIRED AND ...

% OF ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS THAT REQUIRE WORKER TO:	DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY	ALMOST NEVER
Talk face to face with customers	58	7	2	32
Talk on phone with customers	53	7	2	37
Read instructions	54	21	7	18
Write paragraphs	31	17	10	43
Do arithmetic	65	12	4	19
Use computers	51	5	3	41

ROWS MAY NOT ADD TO 100 BECAUSE OF ROUNDING

... THE CREDENTIALS EMPLOYERS WANT IN ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS

% OF ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS THAT REQUIRE:	CENTRAL CITY	SUBURBS
ALL FOUR METRO AREAS		
High school diploma	75	70
General experience	73	68
Specific experience	67	59
References	73	72
Vocational or other training	42	39
BOSTON		
High school diploma	80	75
General experience	78	71
Specific experience	69	58
References	81	81
Vocational or other training	43	44

HOW EMPLOYERS RECRUIT AND SCREEN NEW WORKERS

THE LAST ENTRY-LEVEL WORKER HIRED (IN PERCENT) THROUGH:	CENTRAL CITY	SUBURBS
Newspaper ad	24	29
Help wanted sign	4	5
Walk-in	14	14
Referral from		
Current employees	26	25
Acquaintances and others	14	14
Employment services, community agencies	14	9
School	3	5
Union	1	1

COLUMNS MAY NOT ADD TO 100 BECAUSE OF ROUNDING

ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS (IN PERCENT) THAT SCREEN APPLICANTS BY:	CENTRAL CITY	SUBURBS
Written application	79	82
Interview	88	88
Skills test	50	40
Verify education	35	25
Check criminal record	32	29

SOURCE: MULTI-CITY STUDY OF URBAN INEQUALITY

the bus, and the car, and whatever. . . .” However, some urban employers protested that their neighborhoods’ reputation for crime “far exceeds the reality.” Interestingly, suburban employers were more concerned about inner-city crime than their central city counterparts, suggesting that such fears may be prone to media-fueled exaggeration.

Employers also expressed concern about the quality of the inner-city workforce, with 60 percent voicing negative views in the face-to-face interviews. Many spoke of the lack of hard skills such as reading and writing; also of concern (but mentioned less frequently) were negative evaluations of soft skills or character. In all four cities, employers linked the problems to race, but more often to class and culture. Yet, evaluations of the skills of urban and suburban workers were far from monolithic. Many asserted that there was no difference between urban and suburban workers; 21 percent painted inner-city workers as a better workforce in some ways — more likely, perhaps, to be available for work, and more content and committed workers in menial or low-paid jobs.

Most firms that had moved out of the city gave reasons that have little to do with perceptions of neighborhoods. They cited the need for more space, lower rent, or lower taxes; the desire to consolidate scattered operations after downsizing; or the need for better access to transportation. But about one in seven of those moving or planning a move did raise “inner-city” issues in explaining the firm’s decision to move; all of those mentioned crime or related issues such as vandalism and a few also cited the quality of the workforce.

Finally, what of inner-city-based businesses that choose not to move? First, smaller businesses and those tied to local clientele (such as local merchants or community banks) do not have relocation as an option. Second, employers such as universities, government agencies, and nonprofits have a strong commitment to their locations. Third, some low-wage or environmentally harmful industries found inner-cities’ workforces and sites advantageous; for example, a penal institution was one of the few firms moving to an inner-city location. This reminds us that such moves can sometimes be a mixed blessing.

RECRUITING AND SCREENING

One potential source of dysfunction in urban labor markets is firms’ recruiting and screening practices. If practices rely too heavily on word-of-mouth among closed social networks or are geographically limited in scope, firms may miss finding and hiring qualified workers, especially blacks and other minorities. We asked firms how they recruited the last entry-level person hired, and about screening methods used in the hiring process.

Recruiting practices for entry-level jobs are pretty basic. Employers reported that newspaper ads and referrals from current employees each generated about 25 percent of new hires; referrals from acquaintances produced 14 percent; another 14 percent were filled after an applicant walked in off the street. Most of the rest were referred by an employment service, school, or union, or applied after seeing a help wanted sign. For screening, most firms use a written application and an interview. About half use some form of testing. City employers used meth-

EMPLOYERS’ BELIEFS ABOUT RACIAL AND ETHNIC PREFERENCES

% OF EMPLOYERS WHO SAY THAT:	CENTRAL CITY	SUBURBS
ALL FOUR METRO AREAS		
Their customers prefer to deal with employees of their own race or ethnic group	23	19
Their employees prefer to deal with employees of their own race or ethnic group	28	22
Other employers in the industry prefer employees of their own race or ethnic group	25	21
Any one of the three above	37	30
BOSTON		
Their customers prefer to deal with employees of their own race or ethnic group	21	18
Their employees prefer to deal with employees of their own race or ethnic group	27	18
Other employers in the industry prefer employees of their own race or ethnic group	24	20
Any one of the three above	38	28

SOURCE: MULTI-CITY STUDY OF URBAN INEQUALITY

HOW HIRING MATCHES UP WITH JOB APPLICANTS

RATIO OF FIRMS’ LATEST HIRES TO APPLICANTS FOR:	CENTRAL CITY	SUBURBS
ALL FOUR METRO AREAS		
Black males	.62	.51
Black females	.89	.68
Hispanic	1.01	1.12
White and other	1.18	1.09
BOSTON		
Black males	.55	.58
Black females	.59	.41
Hispanic	1.12	1.09
Asians	.62	.60
White and other	1.15	1.00

NOTE: RATIO IS PERCENTAGE OF HIRES BY RACE OR ETHNICITY AND GENDER DIVIDED BY THE PERCENTAGE OF APPLICANTS BY RACE OR ETHNICITY AND GENDER. ASIAN DATA ARE OMITTED FROM THE TABLE BECAUSE OF THE SMALL POPULATION IN DETROIT AND ATLANTA MAKES THE DATA UNRELIABLE. THE RATIOS FOR LOS ANGELES ARE 1.12 (CENTRAL CITY) AND 0.79 (SUBURBS).

SOURCE: MULTI-CITY STUDY OF URBAN INEQUALITY

ods roughly similar to those in other parts of the metro area.

The prevalence of informal recruiting, particularly referrals from friends and current employees (almost 40 percent of hires in our sample), tends to favor those who are connected to the incumbent workforce and work to the disadvantage of those who are geographically or socially isolated. Even firms that officially rely on formal methods often end up hiring via informal networks because managers find this easier and more reliable. One manager for a public agency that advertises job

Our survey asked employers about whether customers, employees, or other employers in the industry prefer to deal with people of their own race or ethnicity. Overall, almost one-quarter of employers think that customers, employees, or other employers would prefer to deal with people of the same race or ethnicity. These results are fairly similar across cities.

Another less direct indicator of employer attitudes is the ratio of new hires to applicants by racial, ethnic, and gender group. Firms in our survey hired a greater proportion of white applicants than of black male, black female, and Latino applicants. In almost every instance, the ratios of hires to applicants are smallest for black males, and in several instances the difference between the ratio for black males and other groups is startling. Some of these differences no doubt result from differing qualifications in the applicant pools. But the divergence between central city and suburban employers in our sample raises some questions. For compared to their urban counterparts, suburban firms hire a smaller proportion of black male and female applicants. This contrast is striking because urban jobs require (on average) higher levels of skill and qualifications than jobs in the suburbs. As blacks have lower levels of credentials, education, and test scores than whites (on average), we would expect the hiring ratios of blacks to be higher in the suburbs.

When asked about racial or ethnic differences in skill or worker quality, the largest group of respondents consisted of those who answered "I don't know" (sometimes citing the fact that their workforce is too segregated to assess different groups) or "I don't see any differences." Some of these attitudes appear to be sincere; others may have been offered as the socially acceptable answer. When employers did note black/white or Latino/Anglo differences, they touched on many of the same issues that arose about inner-city workers. One common view was that blacks and Latinos have less command of hard skills, such as reading, writing, and math. Many attributed these skill differences to educational attainment or school quality.

Employers' criticisms of blacks' hard skills often shaded over into discussions of soft skills — for example, the claim that many African-Americans don't know how to apply for a job or present a professional image. And here some of the views expressed clearly fall into the category of stereotypes. Standard stereotypes about black hostility and oversensitivity abounded. Many employers opined that black workers have "a chip on their shoulder" or "feel like they're owed;" these phrases came up recurrently. Another recurrent stereotype depicted blacks as lazy or unmotivated. But other employers see black workers (and even more commonly Latino and Asian immigrants) as needing the job, and therefore more willing to work hard, do menial tasks, and stay at a job longer. A few viewed black workers' assertiveness as understandable or even positive.

The persistence of stereotypes is distressing, particularly given rising skill requirements for entry-level jobs. Though skills shortfalls in African-American and Latino populations represent a real and serious problem, their labor market outcomes may suffer, in part, because of employer perceptions (and misperceptions) of the hard and soft skills of different racial and ethnic groups. It is particularly difficult to distinguish between

legitimate, skill-based screening and discrimination, when soft or social skills are involved. Moreover, the combination of informal recruiting and screening methods, which are prone to subjectivity, and the rising demand for soft skills, where assessment is hard to free entirely from cultural differences, stereotypes, and prejudice, presents something of a double whammy for inner-city workers, particularly workers of color.

CLOSING THE GAP

Our findings do not paint a rosy picture of the market for entry-level jobs in urban labor markets. Returning to the questions we posed at the beginning of the article, it is clear that there are *not* jobs for all who want to work, in large part because of jobs' rising skill demands.

On the other hand, skill barriers facing inner-city workers pertain more to basic skills than to information-age expertise. Moreover, the skills mismatch is only one hurdle among several. Lower-skill jobs continue to filter to the suburbs, driven primarily by available space or low rents, but at least in some small part by fears and concerns about crime and the inner-city workforce. Informal recruiting methods, stereotyping, and bias may also contribute to a failure to hire potentially successful candidates, especially minorities.

Such multiple hurdles call for multiple responses. Upgrading the basic education that inner-city youth receive is a top priority. Strengthening and supplementing public transit systems can help workers reach the suburbs where lower-skill jobs are growing. Diversity training for managers can help them to see beyond stereotypes, recruit more widely, and successfully manage a diverse workforce.

The current, low-unemployment labor market presents an important opportunity to help employers who are now scrambling to find workers, including inner-city residents of color who previously have been relatively low on the hiring queue. Indeed, businesses are dramatically expanding their hiring and in-house training of less-educated inner-city workers, even prison parolees. Education and training policy can capitalize on our current tight labor markets by boosting our efforts to improve the basic *and* the soft skills that employers indicate they need. Rather than becoming complacent about the temporary upsurge in jobs or bemoaning the labor shortage, now is a critical time to invest in training, nurture new recruiting networks, and challenge old stereotypes. Although our interviews date back to a time when unemployment rates were higher, they make a compelling case that the gaps in the structure of job opportunities for inner-city workers are profound. Today's strong labor market will not completely erase such barriers, but it offers a real chance to begin breaking them down. *

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