

## **Career Builders**

By Mary-Alane Wiltse

### **We Have a Work Ethic**

“And the sign said, long-haired freaky people need not apply”. These lyrics are from a 1971 hit by the Five Man Electrical Band. Although I may be taking the theme a bit out of context, I think this song points out that thirty-five years ago employers did not have a very high opinion of the younger generation.

Those “long-hair freaky people” are now the employers of today and from what we hear from local businesses the generation gap is as wide now as it was when the baby boomers were the freaky people, instead of the ones in charge. At the Career Center, we constantly hear from employers that our young people have no work ethic. A few months ago, Senator Clinton even got in trouble with her own daughter when she made similar comments.

In actuality, I do not think employers are really complaining about the younger generation. I think they are complaining about the available labor pool for entry-level, lower paying jobs. Of course, this labor pool naturally includes a lot of teenagers and young adults, so they are the ones taking the brunt of the blame.

In my opinion, the work ethic of local employees is not the major factor in explaining why businesses find it difficult to maintain a stable entry-level workforce.

Demographics are an important reason. In 1970, sixteen percent of the population in New York State was between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. Today, that percent of the population has decreased to thirteen percent. This is not just a percentage decrease. There are a half million less New York State residents between the ages of 15 and 24 now than there was in 1970. There are simply fewer people in the younger segment of the labor pool to fill entry-level jobs.

Honestly, another important issue is the pay scale for these jobs. In 1971, the minimum wage was \$1.60 per hour. To have the same purchasing power today, the pay rate needs to be \$7.72 per hour. New York State has one of the highest minimum wages in the country. On January 1, 2007, the state will raise the rate for the third straight year. The minimum wage will be \$7.15 per hour. The purchasing power will still be below the 1971 level.

I understand that there are a number of factors that contribute to the reason employers can often times not pay a higher wage. Worker compensation rates, unemployment insurance costs and other factors can make it very expensive to do business. However, none of this changes the fact that an employee making less than \$8.00 per hour has buying power that is below the 1970 minimum wage rate.

It is basic human nature that we tend to respect and care about those people and institutions that show respect and concern towards us. In terms of employment, the amount of our paycheck is directly related to the amount we believe our employer values our contribution. Therefore, for low-wage jobs, with few or no benefits, the connection between employer and employee is naturally weak. Businesses paying minimum wages should expect that they might not be at the top of their workers' priority list.

When employers complain about not being able to find good workers, many times they will say, “I just want someone who will show up”. It does not seem like an unreasonable request. However, if you look at it from the point of view of the people who are holding entry-level jobs, it can sometimes seem like an impossible requirement.

For teenagers, the demands on their time can be overwhelming. Most of these young people are either in high school or in college. For these individuals, their education is their number one priority. Sometimes they have to make choices between going to work or preparing for a test, or finishing a term paper, or participating in an activity that will look good on their transcript. Choosing school over work does not mean they do not have a good work ethic. It means they are thinking about their long-term goals, just as they should.

In general, there are two groups of adults that work in low-wage jobs. The first group is comprised of people who use the job to supplement their household’s income. It can be either a second job or a second income. In either case, the job comes in second to the primary occupation or to family responsibilities.

Other adults’ low-wage jobs are their main means of support. For them, one unexpected car repair, or minor illness can cause havoc and lost work time. It can also make financial sense for them to change jobs quickly and often because one pays a quarter more per hour, or is a mile closer to home. The high turnover rates among these workers can have little to do with their work ethic. It can have everything to do with their life circumstances.

I know that I have not provided one solution for the business community needing entry-level workers. I also know that their problem is not just caused by a poor work ethic among our local labor force. We should stop saying that.

*Mary-Alane Wiltse is the Director of the Workforce New York Career Center at Columbia-Greene Community College. For more information visit the website at [www.columbiagreenejobs.org](http://www.columbiagreenejobs.org), or call 828-4181 ext. 5510.*