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WorkWise: Career-changing into 'green' - what it takes

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Industries with a future are in short supply these days. Capitalizing on one might take some doing. People agree that "green" has a future, but not on what it is. Furthermore, growth has slowed.

Executive recruiter Gayle Oliver-Plath, founder of CareerEco in Atlanta, explains that "there are green companies and green jobs. The companies are reducing or minimizing the adverse impact of human activity on the environment. The jobs minimize adverse impact. . . and/or optimize the utilization of natural resources." She maintains that you find green where capitalism and environmentalism intersect.



Phil Herzog views the industry through a different lens. He's vice president of Sales and Marketing for the Tyler, Texas-based Hebb E-Bikes Inc., working out of the western region's Poulsbo, Wash., office. For him, green is "commitment to social responsibility or trying to improve quality of life through sustainable products and services." He points out that companies in wide-ranging industries fit this definition, that "many apply their social consciousness to employee relationships . . . (and overall) quality of life. It's a culture."

If differing definitions don't dissuade you, consider how green job growth outpaced other industries. The Pew Charitable Trusts reports that, in the nine years leading to 2007, green jobs grew well over twice the rate of our jobs throughout the nation. What continues to drive green through the downturn?

AGE

People disagree about what propels the industry. Oliver-Plath credits youth for knowing that "they will live with the results of environmental concerns." Herzog credits the media, such as coverage of Al Gore's work on global warming. Amy Berry, Corporate Communications manager at Reno's Mariah Power Inc., observes, "I feel that youth gets it. The question is whether industry is forcing something on the youth or whether youth is coming with whole new expectations."

Are there opportunities only for youth? Herzog argues that "age is a huge problem for any world. I do think that this is the world of the young and beautiful."

"I don't think youth are the only people with career opportunities," Oliver-Plath counters. "But there aren't enough of them. And they'll need to be mentored. Companies aren't risking a dot-com bust by putting their future in the hands of really 'green' employees."

DOOR-OPENERS

Herzog, Berry and Oliver-Plath, in their mid-30s or older, found ways to enter the industry. Herzog came through a contact, the company president, but he brought the necessary category experience. "You can't ignore essential requirements of competence, experience and background in products or services that seem to embrace the green movement," he says. "I'd developed marketing programs for fitness equipment." This year he projects selling 1,000 electric bikes retailing at \$2,000 each.

Berry came to Mariah Power, which sells the wind turbine Windspire, not from PR but advertising. She reports that there are boomers in her 20-member VC-backed start-up, beginning with the president. Living near Lake Tahoe after working in New York, she read Thomas Friedman's "Hot, Flat, and Crowded" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.95), which became the catalyst for her decision to job hunt in the industry. Friedman advocates "a (BEGIN ITAL)green America (END ITAL) . . . building more and more knowledge-intensive green-collar technology jobs . . ."

Job hunting only three months, Berry met her contact after a Nevada Governor's Industry Appreciation Dinner. She works with other career-changers, including:

- a Professional Engineer from construction;
- a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering from GE; and

- a marketing assistant and webmaster from health care.

Herzog recommends job hunting at trade shows and, to avoid deception, carefully researching company "results and impact -- not what (people are) saying." Oliver-Plath, who places candidates in sustainability and engineering, advocates being strategic: "Grab as much responsibility as you can, even if the company isn't green, around sustainability or environmental optimization. You'll start building your portfolio of skills that will make other companies want to recruit you away down the road."

What if you don't have a job? She advises you to "find training or internships knowing that they will pay off in spades once we start recovering."

(Dr. Mildred L. Culp welcomes your questions at culp@workwise.net. Copyright 2009 Passage Media.)

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