CHAMBER

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Brent Huntsman, Carpet One Floor & Home

Brent Huntsman was born and raised in La Grande and graduated from La Grande High School in 1988. While serving a church mission in South Korea, Brent learned to read, write and speak Korean.


Huntsman

In 1995, he graduated from what is now EOU, where he met and married his wife, Donna. They have four boys and two adopted daughters from China.

Brent was part owner and general manager of Skip-Line Inc. in Island City, innovators and manufacturers of automated road marking controllers and data loggers. Prior to that, while working at Skip-Line, he went to evening classes at EOU to earn an MBA in 2005.

In 2015, Brent became part owner of Carpet One Floor & Home and has worked to grow the business with major renovations and adding a new store location in Baker City.

Brent and Donna have a hobby farm just outside of La Grande. He enjoys gardening, hunting, wood cutting, camping, skiing, coaching and watching his kids participate in school activities and events.

Shawn Risteen, United Finance

Shawn was born and raised in La Grande. He is the branch manager at United Finance Co. and has worked there for 16 years.


Risteen

Shawn is currently serving his third year as the president of the board of directors for La Grande Main Street Downtown. He is also a proud Rotarian who serves on the board of directors for the La Grande Rotary. Shawn's goal has been to help make this a great community for residents and business. He's always believed if there is something the community needs, you must step up and help get it done.

Wells Fargo settles state investigations

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Wells Fargo will pay $575 million in a settlement with attorneys general from all 50 states and the District of Columbia who investigated fake accounts opened without the knowledge of customers and a string of other dodgy practices.

Under the agreement announced Friday, the bank will also create teams to review and respond to customer complaints about its banking and sales practices.

The bank has been under a cloud since 2015 when it acknowledged employees had opened millions of fake bank accounts for customers in order to meet sales goals. It has also said it sold auto insurance and other financial products to customers who didn't need them.

Wells Fargo has already been ordered to pay more than $1.2 billion in penalties and faced stricter regulations.

"This agreement underscores our serious commitment to making things right in regard to past issues as we work to build a better bank," said CEO Tim Sloan.

Sloan apologized for the phony accounts and other practices during a congressional hearing in 2017, but the company remained under pressure from the weight of all the scandals. The company has announced plans to lay off up to 10 percent of its workforce over the next three years.

California, the bank's home state, will get more than a quarter of the settlement funds because of the number of Wells Fargo customers residing there.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra called the bank's behavior "disgraceful."

"Wells Fargo customers entrusted their bank with their livelihood, their dreams, and their savings for the future," said Becerra. "Instead of safeguarding its customers, Wells Fargo exploited them, signing them up for products — from bank accounts to insurance — that they never wanted."

BRIEFLY

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more information and to register, go to www.oregonmint.org/annualmeeting.html.

Training offered for Specialty Crop Block Grant proposals

The Oregon Department of Agriculture will be accepting proposals for project ideas as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program for 2019 until noon Jan. 31. Specialty crops are defined as commonly recognized fruits, vegetables, tree nuts and nursery crops. Approximately $1.5 million is expected to be available to agriculture industry associations, producer groups, processors, commodity commissions, nonprofits, for-profits and local government agencies in Oregon.

ODA is requesting 15-page grant proposals from applicants describing their proposed projects. Proposals should be submitted online. ODA will offer online training to provide applicants with an in-depth look at the program and explain the grant writing process step-by-step. More information, including time and date for the online training, is available at www.oda.direct/SCBGP.

Cannabis conference set for January in Portland

PORTLAND — Registrations is open for the 2019 Cannabis Collaborative Conference, a two-day convention and networking event focused on the business side of the fast-growing cannabis industry, which will take place Jan. 23-24 at the Portland Metropolitan Exposition Center. Now in its fifth year, the CCC draws noted cannabis professionals, activists, investors and politicians from all over the state. For 2019, the conference will focus on the specific challenges of a maturing in-state market and increasing competition for cross-border expansion. There will also be presentations from advocacy groups about legislative priorities and a "Pitch Cannabis Contest" wherein cannabis businesses and startups will have the chance to pitch their company to a panel of investors. On Jan. 22, the day prior to the main event, an Investors Forum will provide educational content for those seeking investment and those hoping to get into the industry.

Oregon Main Street offers revitalization grants

SALEM — The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) is offering grants for up to $200,000 in matching funds for downtown revitalization efforts in communities participating in the Oregon Main Street Network. The Oregon Main Street Revitalization Grant funds may be used to acquire, rehabilitate and construct buildings on properties in designated downtown areas statewide. Funded projects must facilitate community revitalization that will lead to private investment, job creation or retention, establishing or expanding viable businesses, or creating a stronger tax base.

Preservation office staff is available to talk with applicants about potential grant projects and review applications. A free workshop specific to the Oregon Main Street Revitalization Grant will be held Jan. 25 in Salem. Registration is required. To learn more about the grant, workshop and the Oregon Main Street Network visit www.oregonheritage.org or contact Sheri Stuart at Sheri.Stuart@oregon.gov or 503-986-0679.

Producers benefit from farmers.gov dashboard

The vision of farmers.gov is to provide farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners with online self-service applications, educational materials, engagement opportunities and business tools.

Many of these self-service features are available through the secure farmers.gov portal, where you can log in to your dashboard to apply for programs, process transactions and manage accounts.

Producers who work with USDA are encouraged to get an USDA eAuthentication account, which will provide access to the farmers.gov dashboard and enable you to better manage your USDA business online. To create an online account, first go to www.eauth.usda.gov. If you need assistance, your local USDA Service Center staff can sign you up in the office. Once enrolled, users with a secure Level 2 eAuthentication ID linked to their USDA customer record can apply for select USDA programs and view and print farm maps and farm records data. In the next year, USDA plans to add new features to the dashboard.

Visit farmers.gov/sign-in to learn more. For help setting up your account, call the help desk at 1-800-457-3642. More information is also available at www.farmers.gov/media/blog/2018/12/19/get-access-your-farmersgov-dashboard.

WAGE

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So unless companies are willing to eat all or part of their higher labor costs, they need to increase their workers' efficiency. A company's wage increase of 10 percent can be offset if its employees produce 10 percent more.

"We need meaningful improvements" in productivity, said Greg Foran, CEO of Walmart's U.S. division. "Pricing generally isn't going up. It's going to come down as competition intensifies."

Though higher wages are driving retailers to make workers more efficient, cost isn't the only factor. The companies are also under intensifying pressure to speed delivery times of online orders to compete with Amazon and please customers who expect fast delivery.

Walmart employees can now use mobile devices to check whether an item is in stock and avoid trekking to distant storerooms. The phones also send alerts when an item needs a price change and directs workers to those items.

And in a cluster of stores, Walmart has deployed robots that monitor stockpiles and can send photos of empty shelves to employees' phones. The information is sent to a conveyer system that scans boxes being unloaded from trucks. Workers then organize the boxes for delivery to the sales floor. The system has slashed the number of people needed to unload trucks.

"When I first started working for Walmart, we would unload the truck and you would have associates running all over the backroom trying to find out where to put things," said Ty Ford, who has worked at Walmart in Houston for eight years. "It wasn't organized in any way."

One technology being tested is "smart glasses," which display information on the lenses so workers can identify items from online orders for curbside pickup. The glasses can identify which items to pick, thereby saving time that would be spent looking at phones.

To try to raise productivity, retailers are turning mainly to technology rather than hounding employees to work harder. But pressure does creep in: At Target, workers who carry online orders to shoppers' cars now hear a honking horn on their devices, instead of a generic bell, to signify that customers are waiting.

Jaana Remes, an economist at McKinsey Global Institute, noted after the Great Recession, stagnant pay reduced the incentive for employers to invest in labor-saving technology. Now, that's starting to reverse. Remes pointed out that labor-saving technology is more common in countries where pay is higher. Self-serve restaurants, for example, are more prevalent in Scandinavia and Japan than in the United States.

"When have you seen grocery baggers in Europe?" Remes said. "We still have them in the U.S."

But perhaps not for long. For this year's holiday shopping season, some Target employees began using mobile devices to check out shoppers. Under pressure from online retailers, Target is also investing in technology to transform its stores into shipping hubs to cut costs and speed deliveries.

CEO Brian Cornell said in November that the company wants to achieve efficiencies to help offset the cost of higher pay and other investments. So Target has redesigned the back rooms of most of its 1,800 stores to shave seconds off picking and packing and to accelerate online shipments.

During a recent tour of a Target in Edison, New Jersey, workers undertook specialized tasks in assembly line operations in a space the size of about 12 of its parking spaces. Once filled, carts are placed on marked spots within arm's reach of workers who pack shipments. Apps reveal how much tape to use for each box. Packers use foot pedals to dispense inflated air pillows to cushion items when boxed.

It's unclear whether retailers' efforts will be enough to boost the overall productivity of America's workforce, which has been mired in anemic growth since the Great Recession. Productivity — output per hour worked — is critical to rising living standards. An economy can expand only as fast as its working age population and the growth in worker productivity.

Though U.S. productivity picked up a bit in 2018, it grew just 1.3 percent in the July-September quarter from a year earlier. That's only about half the pace of the 1990s and early 2000s.

Economists have suggested several theories to explain chronically weak productivity growth. Some say the U.S. is just less innovative than in the past. Others think the government has trouble measuring the impact of free or low-cost inventions, like search engines and music streaming services, and that workers are actually more productive than we think.

Many economists also note it can take time for businesses to determine how best to capitalize on new technologies. Retailers are still experimenting, for example, with mobile devices, which have been in use for at least a decade. Personal computers began appearing in offices in the 1980s but didn't accelerate productivity until much later.

Kohl's is just now stepping up its use of mobile technology to help employees restock shelves more efficiently and equipping some with iPad devices for faster checkouts.

"We know that there will be continued headwinds from wage pressures," Bruce Besanko, Kohl's chief financial officer, told industry analysts last month. "And so we know that we needed to find more ways" to cut costs.

To save on labor costs, McDonald's has installed self-service kiosks in 4,000 of its U.S. restaurants this year. All told, about half its roughly 14,000 U.S. restaurants now include them.

"When you've got your two major lines — food and labor — both with inflationary increases, that puts pressure on the bottom line," McDonald's CEO Stephen Easterbrook said in October.

Mooyah, a hamburger chain with 80 restaurants mostly in the South, is responding to higher wages by reconfiguring its new restaurants to enable cooks to function like basketball players — pivoting on one foot when necessary but mostly remaining in place. During peak hours, this system is intended to enable five employees to do work that now requires up to nine. (Mooyah is owned by the private equity firm Balmoral Funds.)

"They need to do everything without steps," said Michael Mabry, Mooyah's chief operating officer.

Mabry said that because the store has had to raise pay in recent years, "we've got to offset that somewhere, and it can't all flow through to the guest, because they'll push back on pricing."

How all this affects most workers isn't quite clear.

Eric Hoffman, who worked at Walmart distribution centers for 13 years, is all too familiar with a darker side of companies seeking to boost productivity. Hoffman, 33, used to enjoy his job loading cases onto a shipping dock for Walmart, most recently in Winter Haven, Florida. He earned $21.90 an hour and received bonuses for exceeding production quotas.

But over the past year, he said, managers raised quotas and shortened the time available to do tasks. And there was an added pressure, too: Management, Hoffman said, told workers they had to "beat Amazon."

"You guys don't want to become like Kmart," his bosses would say.

Hoffman quit his job five months ago to take an apprenticeship at an electrical company, installing equipment that pays about $10.50 per hour.

"The stress is gone," Hoffman said.

In response, Walmart said it's been testing ways to increase production in light of rising competition, online demand and higher labor costs.

"We are focused on making our operations more effective and efficient while innovating to make work easier and more engaging for our associates," said Michelle Malashock, a spokeswoman, who declined to address Hoffman's specific complaints.

Transitions to new technologies and business processes, Remes noted, can be difficult and disruptive for employees.

"The good news is that tech-enabled productivity gains help make workers' time more valuable and could lead to wage gains," she said. "They also incentivize companies to invest on worker skills, opening up better opportunities in the future."