

Work:

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Turnover, then, is low, according to Karlson. His workers appreciate their jobs and the benefits of their labor, so they work well, but this is not all. They did not just start working hard when they joined his company; they started as good workers.

Karlson relies on pre-employment interviews to screen potential employees. Even if he has to do interviews by Zoom, rather than in person, he likes to be able to look at a potential employee in the eye. He said he tries to figure their abilities and their character. If he thinks an employee will be a good fit, he said, they usually are.

Karlson said his company is "in the best position we've ever been," and this is during a pandemic when many other companies are struggling to retain or to find employees.

N.W. Crane has experience in worker relations, which Karlson attributed to its humble beginnings. The company grew as part of N.W. Metal Fabricators Inc., a company owned by his father, Kerry Karlson. His father was doing well with metal fabricating, but he saw the need for cranes. When he started operating his own crane, more and more employers approached him for help. He added a second crane, which led to more.

By 2005, the crane side of the business was large enough to justify a separate business, and N.W. Crane Services was born. It began operating on its own property, separate from the fabrication company where it started.

A family operation that has developed since Ryan Karlson's father first came to Hermiston with his family in 1986, the companies treat their workers like family, and that approach has "gone a long way" to inspiring employees to stay, he said.

Having experienced workers also is vital, Karlson said, because their jobs are no small feat.

He has nine cranes. The smallest weighs 40 tons. The largest tops out at 550 tons. He recently had this biggest crane on site at Lamb Weston. It took 15 semi-trailers to move the crane and a 60-ton support crane to put it together. Taking it down, after the job, takes his staff 5-1/2 hours of coordinated, skilled and difficult work.

"They're amazing," Karlson said of his employees.

Economists: Prepare for headwinds to temper growth

To say it's been a tough year to be a business owner would be an understatement.

The rise and the fall of COVID-19 cases, risk levels that opened and closed businesses, new safety protocols and a severe labor shortage have forced many business owners to rethink and retool their operations. Some industries — such as health care and leisure and hospitality — have been hit hard by the pandemic and a lack of workers. Other industries haven't felt a thing, economists say.

In response, small businesses have raised wages and bumped up benefits to draw works, which often requires raising prices to offset these new costs. A job that paid a minimum wage of \$9.25 an hour in 2016 now pays \$12.75 an hour, according to the Oregon



Ilyas Harral, of Pendleton, uses a rope to guide a crane segment into position Monday, Sept. 27, 2021, while working with Hermiston-based N.W. Crane Service Inc. at Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland, Washington.



Riley Sederburg, of Adams, lines up a hydraulic component while working with Hermiston-based N.W. Crane Service Inc. to assemble a crane Monday, Sept. 27, 2021, at Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland, Washington.

Bureau of Labor and Industries. For the past five weeks, EO Media Group explored the effect of the labor shortage on businesses, industries and workers young and old.

The Oregon Employment Department reported the state regained nearly 2 out of 3 jobs lost in spring 2020 when government mandates restricted or closed business operations. A record level of job openings were reported in April and June in Oregon and across the country. Businesses reported 98,000 job vacancies at any given time between April and June.

In addition, there were about 32,500 Oregonians between April and June who said they couldn't work because of child care concerns or health concerns related to COVID-19.

EO Media Group asked regional economists Christopher Rich and Gail Krumenauer to project the economic outlook for their areas and Damon Runberg, the state's economist, to comment on Oregon's future economy. Their answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: What is the economic vision for Oregon going forward now that the initial impacts of the

pandemic-related shutdowns are behind us?

A: Krumenauer: I think the general, common theme is that we'd all hope to see continued recovery and/or economic expansion, but we have already seen higher inflation in recent months. It's due in part to worker wages rising, in part to higher demand (this summer for things like air travel and accommodations), and also in part to shortages in supply chains that are reducing the ability to produce as many of certain goods as people want (microchips and cars are a good example of this).

Q: Where is the economy headed?

A: Runberg: As recovery and/or expansion continues, there are some longer-term facts that are going to come into play, creating headwinds for growth. Those are lower net in-migration — the primary way we grow our workforce — and ongoing or increasing retirements. According to the Current Population Survey, there was a 4.5% increase in those 65-plus who were not in the labor force in 2020. That is a big jump, roughly 2 million people age 65 and older are out of the labor force nationwide. The big picture trend is clear that the retiring of the baby boomers has begun and it is one of the factors in our tight labor market.

Q: Will businesses have to continue to pivot to stay ahead of this current labor crisis?

A: Krumenauer: As for businesses pivoting, or rather

continuing to adjust their hiring strategies, yes. I think they've already been incredibly innovative in changing their business operations due to COVID, and in trying to hire more workers when the labor market is so tight (lots of job openings, relatively low unemployment, and some workers still facing barriers to taking jobs).

Q: What are some of the things employers are doing to encourage workers to return to the workforce?

A: Krumenauer: For one, employers have raised wages. Those wages have risen by more than 2% in Oregon over the past year. Three out of five offered health benefits, and half offered retirement benefits. One out of 10 of employers offering health insurance, and one out of five offering retirement benefits, cited worker hiring and retention advantages related to those offerings. Half of Oregon's private firms offered paid holidays, and half offered paid vacation days. One-third offered at least one of the following: flexible work schedules, production or performance bonuses, paid professional development training and life insurance. Some employers have relaxed experience requirements.

Employers also are layering help wanted signs with other efforts such as referral incentives, signing bonuses, posting with online job boards, and working with recruiters outside of their immediate geographical area.

Eastern Oregon outlook by Christopher Rich: "The largest uncertainty in Eastern Oregon's regional outlook is currently COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, the region saw prolonged job growth beginning to slow due to a tight labor market. One of the largest concerns employers voiced was a need to hire workers and a lack thereof. Industries at the top of the list were health care and social assistance, manufacturing, retail trade, leisure and hospitality, and transportation. Total employment reached a peak of 70,570 jobs in October 2019 and the average annual unemployment rate for the region had fallen to a low 4.7%. The January through August average unemployment rate for the region was 5.3%."

Autism:

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Messages flooded Wehrli's accounts as the video spread rapidly and his following skyrocketed. Many of the messages were from people who have loved ones with autism. They said doctors had told them the same thing — that their child would never succeed — and seeing Wehrli's video gave them hope.

"I was definitely surprised,"

Wehrli said. "In fact, I responded by going for a run with my dog because it was so exhilarating for me."

Wehrli was thrilled. He said it felt great to see his video having an impact. He responded to many of the messages, providing people with advice. But then the comments became endless, and he became overwhelmed.

"What they don't realize is that I'm only one person and I can't respond to everybody," he said. "All those messages I was getting

was just so draining. A lot of people think it would be fun to be famous, but it can be very overwhelming. It was draining my mental health and taking a toll on me."

He turned off direct messaging to all his accounts. Instead, he pointed commenters toward his website, where they could sign up for paid coaching. Some people were pushy, insisting that he dole out advice for free. Others signed up for sessions.

Wehrli helps parents navigate the challenges that come with having

children with autism. Whether it be in school or at home, his goal is to draw on his personal experiences to help parents better understand their child.

"I would give them my take on what the situation is like in their shoes to help them understand how to connect with their child and what I think they should do to help their child," he said.

He also uses social media platforms to distribute facts and information about autism, with a goal of dispelling misconceptions. Wehrli

believes social media can be a good way for people to talk constructively about autism and to share their stories. But for now, he's keeping his direct messages closed.

"The internet has the capability of reaching everybody around the world, so anybody who's on the internet who stumbles across this, this would be a good information source for them," he said. "Maybe this is what I'm called to do, what I'm here for. Everybody is trying to find their purpose in life. Maybe this is my purpose."

RetroRagz:

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At the time, the disease was in its infancy, and reported cases were not in the U.S. So, he did not get a test to verify it. He thought he would recover a bit, work through the end of his sickness and be fine.

His illnesses, and other personal issues, delayed the opening of his new business. He had started renting a storefront in downtown Stanfield. Its location, across both a library and a popular restaurant, made it attractive.

As he was an auctioneer with many contacts in antiques and vintage clothing, he was able to develop an inventory. He had paintings, movie memorabilia and more. In addition, he possessed a collection of wood art, which he carved, and inventions of his own making. He fashioned a collection of bow ties for dogs, and he was in the process of making new clothing from used designer wear.

He was excited, and he even painted the name of his new shop, RetroRagz, on his van. His plan was to open in late 2019.

Illnesses, including what he believes to be his first bout with COVID-19, though, kept him from opening his doors. He would later feel better, but would then get sick again and be unable to ready his store for a proper opening. He opened for customers by request, but he did not see much interest from the public.

"Who would want to come to an antique store during a pandemic?" he said.

A couple of times, he brought items outside the front of his store for a sidewalk sale. These sales, however, were not helping him pay his bills. He maintained his online business, selling antiques, but those sales were not paying much, either.

He was falling behind on his rent, his wife was in the hospital with multiple sclerosis and he kept getting sick. His problems were piling up, and he could not find the help he needed.

When he started struggling financially, he applied for the Small Business Assistance COVID-19 Disaster Relief loans and two small grants.

"It took over eight weeks for them to get back to me with a denial for the reason they could not verify I was an actual business," he said.

A simple Google search should be enough to prove its existence, he thought.

"I was crushed," he said. "That was the final blow. I appealed, but haven't heard back from them."

Moving on

Before his most recent COVID-19 infection, he got vaccinated. He obtained the two required shots of the Pfizer vaccine. But that did not keep him from getting his worst case of COVID-19 to that point. Though he feels well now, a month after his positive test, he said he suffered difficulty breathing when he was symptomatic. It was painful, and he was in bed much of the time.

In addition to selling antiques, he was planning to turn his store into an art gallery and maybe even a studio. He dreamed of people being able to visit, sometimes just to sit and look at the paintings which would be hanging on the shop walls.

Instead, he now plans on taking time to care for his wife, who he said just tested positive for COVID-19 while in the hospital. He will also take care of himself, hopefully he will not become ill again.



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian
Dave Bender stands in front of his van outside of his shop, RetroRagz, in Stanfield on Sept. 24, 2021. Bender says he suspects he first caught COVID-19 in late 2019, and tests show he caught it twice in 2021.

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