

Study looks at the reasons small businesses are not thriving

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prisingly, the single most important indicator that would renew small-business owner confidence in business conditions is increased sales in their businesses. This is a fact supported by NFIB's monthly Small-Business Optimism Index report, which has identified poor sales as the top business concern for small firms for 16 quarters running.

Other notable survey findings include:

- Uncertainty is a growth impediment impacting 61 percent of small employers; only 25 percent say uncertainty does not impact them. However, owners of the smallest firms and owners of the young firms were more likely to identify uncertainty as a concern than owners of larger small firms and more established firms.

And while the majority of small employers who believe that uncertainty is a hurdle think of it as economic in nature (83 percent), a comparatively large number term their uncertainty as related to political questions. An extraordinary 51 percent who think uncertainty is an impediment to growth (38 percent of the small-employer population) blame the current political situation at least in part as obstructing their growth.

- While the adverse impact of regulation is often challenging to identify, 40 percent of small employers say that regulatory or legal issues are an impediment to growth. The complex labyrinth of regulations as opposed to a specific regulation or set of regulations was more often cited as an obstacle, with 63 percent of this group (31 percent of the popu-

lation) reporting that a current investment or project was impacted by a regulatory matter. One-quarter of those who find regulations to be a burden either cancelled a project scheduled for the next six months or abandoned investment and/or project plans.

- Forty-one (41) percent reported the lack of finance as an impediment to growth and 19 percent ranked it a serious matter. Though 15 percent of small employers asserted that the lack of finance was their biggest obstacle to growth, 49 percent termed it a minor or no obstacle. More than half (53 percent) of small firm owners surveyed think that internally generated cash flows will be their most important source of financing desired investment over the next five years. Bank loans will be the second most common source. However, 33 percent of those identifying lack of finance as an impediment to growth say that existing financial obligations are "seriously constraining" their

ability to finance desired business investment and another 44 percent say that it is constraining.

- With the unemployment rate near 10 percent, finding skilled workers is still a struggle for small-businesses. Sixty-one (61) percent of those surveyed (24 percent of the total population) said the lack of skilled employees is an impediment to growth and indicated that they would hire at least one additional employee at the current market wage rate in the next six months if they could find people with appropriate skills. Over 37 percent (9% of the population) would employ more than one.

- Just 15 percent of small-business owners cite the lack of a strong management or advisory team as an impediment to growth. Of the group currently possessing a management team, 47 percent are highly confident their current team can provide the necessary assistance to reach the firm's growth objectives in the next

five years. Most citing this impediment want to add management employees rather than to change the ones they have.

The latest NFIB Small Business Poll, Growth – External Impediments, is available at <http://www.nfib.com/growth-study>.

November job numbers stable

Columbia County's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 10.4 percent in November essentially unchanged from the previous month (10.8%) but lower than the year before (12.0%). The rate was higher than the statewide rate (9.1%) and the national rate (8.6%). Total employment climbed by 118 to 22,476 and the number of unemployed people fell by 141 to 2,311. Total employment this November was 617 more than one year before and there were 569 fewer people unemployed this year.

Electricians light new career paths for Oregon workers

by Chris Thomas, Oregon News Service

As Oregon's unemployment rate inches lower, one factor might be the new crop of construction workers coming out of free training programs hosted by union electricians.

The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) offers two types of training in the Portland area, both aimed at those who might not otherwise have been accepted into rigorous union apprenticeship programs. One is an intensive, five-day workshop to be material handlers on construction sites. Instructor Bridget Quinn says it's a good feeling to watch the students succeed, "It's really rewarding to work with somebody who's got their eyes focused on something that they want to achieve – somebody who's motivated and really putting all of their effort in, to achieve a way of life and a career, and benefits – something that's really going to be valuable to them."

IBEW also partners with a social-service group called Constructing Hope to give women and members of minority groups an in-depth look at the trades in a nine-week course. Board member Keith Edwards says people who have been released from prison also are welcome,

"They've paid their debt to society, but they had a hard time coming out and trying to find employment. This is an avenue for them, to help them transition into a workforce environment, help them have confidence so that they can get a job and go back to work and be productive citizens."

The training also includes resumé writing and job-interview skills. The next Constructing Hope course starts in February and is free of charge.

When Steven Steele of Portland finished his material handlers' course, he liked it so much he now volunteers in the Constructing Hope classes, helping students brush up on computer skills, "The class that I just was a part of, we were a very strong class. All of us were there every day – and we stayed in touch, and we even helped transport each other to and from the facility if we needed it."

In the five-day workshop, participants are certified in first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), operating forklifts and special Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety training. The material-handler training is free, and the next sessions will be held in the spring.

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