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Is lack of diversity hurting economy?

by Jim Fisher

STAFF writer

CLARKSBURG -- All across the country, workplace racial diversity is becoming a very hot topic. While thousands of companies are struggling with the issue of diversifying the workforce and attracting top-flight employees, West Virginia's businesses seem to have an additional handicap.

Generally speaking, West Virginia is a middle-aged, predominantly Caucasian state. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, West Virginia is more than 95 percent white.

That lack of underlying existing social networks for non-Caucasians can prove to be very detrimental for companies hoping to attract

minority workers, said Dr. George Hammond, research assistant professor with the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at West Virginia University.

Another factor is that West Virginia is almost exclusively made up of small cities, Hammond said. There are some obvious exceptions to that model, notably the Eastern Panhandle, which has developed close ties to the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. corridor.

But even cities like Wheeling, Charleston, Morgantown and Huntington, large cities by West Virginia

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"Individuals who are not white are a bit more likely to migrate toward bigger cities," Hammond said. "One of the thinkings is the social networks identified with those communities."

It's basically a chicken-and-egg situation: Minorities are reluctant to relocate to West Virginia because there isn't an established minority community.

"In terms of the situation in West Virginia, a lack of diversity is a major demotivator for people to move in," said Judy Tso, anthropologist and principal of Aha Solutions Unlimited of Boston. "All humans want to be in places where they can fit in (and) feel welcome. Not (having) an inclusive culture, both in the home life and in the work life, makes it extremely stressful to live in a place with a lack of diversity. West Virginia is also a state that is known for racism and poverty, both of which send a less than welcoming message to people of color."

So, if minorities hesitate to come to West Virginia, what about international companies? It seems a logical leap that multinational corporations also would be leery about coming to a state so steeped in inherent whiteness.

But that's not necessarily true.

Jan Dickinson, spokeswoman for the state Development Office, and Mark Ferrell, spokesman for U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., said West Virginia has had a lot of success in attracting large foreign and domestic companies.

One such example is Orrick, Harrington and Sutcliffe LLP, a multinational law firm with more than 600

lawyers in 12 offices worldwide. The company began in San Francisco and while expanding, began looking for a place to put its "back-office" functions, such as technical support and paralegals, Dickinson said.

After meeting with Gov. Bob Wise and exploring West Virginia, Orrick CEO Ralph Baxter decided to put that office in Wheeling, she said, bringing about 250 new jobs.

Rockefeller has been very active in recruiting European and Far Eastern companies, Ferrell said, and has never been deterred by the state's lack of diversity.

Some potential employees "won't even look at a state (like West Virginia) unless there is something particular in the company that attracts them," said Dr. Linda Gravett, senior partner with Gravett and Associates, a human resources management consulting firm in Cincinnati.

"And even then, I think they will have some hard questions, such as why there aren't more minorities," Gravett said.

Another issue for West Virginia is a lack of prominent, high-paying, high-tech jobs that typically attract top-flight candidates, Hammond said. While there aren't any specific studies, Hammond said there is "a wealth of anecdotal evidence" that West Virginia's industrial mix and job opportunities are not attractive to young, highly qualified individuals, minority or not.

However, that industry is making some inroads, specifically in the North Central region, which is becoming a high-tech hub and national leader in biometrics research.

And the job market may be the bigger issue.

WetFeet Inc., a San Francisco-based firm, provides research and advice to corporations about their recruiting and retention practices.

Extensive research with African-American and Latino workers have shown that candidates tend to evaluate the job as their first priority, said Steve Pollock, president of WetFeet. They want to ensure that the job involves skills they have honed, is challenging and has an opportunity for advancement.

Employees do take a careful look at the track record of the company in terms of diversity, Pollock said. And the area's geography also plays a part in deciding whether to take a particular job, he said.

"What they tell us is, they look at a number of things: The current diversity of the company, the efforts the company makes to recruit minorities and their sensitivity to issues," Pollock said. "Companies in an area known as being less diverse face different challenges from those in other areas."

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