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CRAIN'S NEW YORK BUSINESS

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[Market improves, but borough needs better training options, roadways](#)

By Tommy Fernandez

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Morris Lee, who recruits staff for local airports, has seen his work take off.

Two weeks ago, he interviewed candidates for 35 openings at a company that supports airlines at John F. Kennedy International Airport. The week before, he screened people for 50 openings at a new cargo company at the same airport.

"There is always somebody coming up with a new job order," says Mr. Lee, executive director of the New York offices of the Council for Airport Opportunity, a nonprofit job-placement program for major airports serving the city.

Hiring for the air transportation industry has soared in Queens. New data from the state Department of Labor show employment in this sector reached 24,000 in the second quarter of 2004--a 13% jump from the previous year. Experts believe that when annual statistics come out, the improvement will even be larger.

Experts warn, however, that these figures are not as cheery as they seem. Sector employment is still down 15% from its peak of 29,000, reached before the World Trade Center attack in 2001. Increased competition in the airline

industry has also cut salaries and is changing the mixture of and requirements for jobs available in the borough.

Experts say that public officials need to offer more training options to local workers and address infrastructure issues, including traffic, if the borough's air transportation job market is to recover fully.

"The workforce needs to be better skilled," says Maxine Lubner, executive director of the City University of New York's Aviation Institute at York College. "There is a great demand for more training."

Outsourcers earn wings

As major airlines cut costs to compete with discount carriers, they are using outsourcers to fill jobs. Outsourcers, which often employ almost all the people who operate and maintain an airport terminal, frequently pay significantly less than the airlines. For example, airplane mechanics working for an outsourcer might earn \$20 an hour, while their counterparts at an airline might make double that figure, experts say.

Even as they cut salaries, employers are also tightening requirements for technical and managerial training, Ms. Lubner says. Candidates for security and customer service positions must understand cutting-edge technology and crowd-management techniques if they want a fighting chance to get these jobs.

While there are some schools, like the Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology at La Guardia Airport and the Aviation High School at Kennedy, Ms. Lubner says that more facilities are needed to upgrade the borough's labor force.

Queens officials, she adds, also need to address a nontraining issue affecting jobs--road access to the airports. Traffic congestion on the Van Wyck Expressway has scared away many cargo companies from New York airports, she says. If traffic could be eased, at least some would come back to do business in the city.

Ms. Lubner says that many companies now find it easier to fly cargo to Chicago and then truck it to the Northeast.

Van Wyck impasse

"Traffic on the Van Wyck is so bad--every day," says Tito Bresto, a manager with Johnny Air Cargo. "If they could do something to improve it, especially between Van Wyck and Grand Central Parkway, that would be a big help."

Public officials appear to be serious about tackling obstacles to filling airport jobs in Queens. The Port Authority of New York & New Jersey last month gave Mr. Lee's council \$1.6 million to bolster its recruitment efforts. Last year, Mr. Lee's team helped place 985 local residents at airport jobs. Since 1972, the program has placed more than 30,000 residents.

To accelerate the pace of job takeoffs, Mr. Lee has been spreading the word to the borough's civic groups, saying, "There are jobs to be had at the airports."



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