Strive to Keep Good Workers in Competitive Market

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist

Energy production in Canada's oil sands fields is booming. News outlets report that Canadian firms are recruiting thousands of U.S. workers. This should give Kern County's employers reason to be concerned.

As Kern's producers also experience an increased demand for energy, they, too, are scrambling to find skilled workers. Canada's energy boom is adding to the competition.

According to Canadian immigration statistics, since 2010, about 35,000 U.S. workers a year have been issued work permits to help extract oil from the sands in western Canada. The drain of U.S. workers into the frigid Canadian plains is reminiscent of the construction of the Alaskan Pipeline in the 1970s and 1980s.

Who among us did not know a local engineer, welder, heavy equipment operator or carpenter who was making buckets-full of money commuting to a job along the pipeline that stretched across Canada, connecting Alaskan oil fields to U.S. terminals? Like today, the high pay and steady employment more than compensated for the bone-chilling winters and time spent away from family.

But it's just not the Canadian energy boom that is causing Kern's hiring agents to lose sleep today. The improving economy is increasing the competition to hire top-notch workers in all fields. This will be particularly true in the health care industry, which is expected to see thousands of new patients when the federal Affordable Care Act is fully implemented.

Key to meeting these workforce challenges is for companies to develop effective hiring strategies. But equally important is for companies to take steps to retain the good employees already on the payroll.

Among these steps are providing the following for your team members:

Respect – Don't take workers for granted. Don't assume they will "stick around" regardless of the workplace environment.

Feedback – Don't wait for an annual review to tell a worker when performance is superior, or deficient. Involve workers in decision-making, and give public recognition for innovative ideas and hard work. Monitor employee job satisfaction. Head off problems before they result in employee turnover.

Fair, equitable pay – Wages should reflect the marketplace. In highly competitive fields, companies looking to hire the top applicants often must pay above the "going rate." However, some companies are quick to use high pay to lure new employees, but stingy when it comes to giving raises to existing workers. The resulting wage inequities seldom will remain "secret." And these inequities often cause long-time key employees to leave for better-paying jobs.

Meaningful benefits – There's more to "compensation" than a paycheck. Health care, flex time, savings plans, training, continuing education and promotional opportunities are among the benefits workers weigh when making career decisions.
And while conducting "exit interviews" may seem a bit like closing the barn door after the horse escapes, the information you can gain is critical to developing an employee retention strategy. How can you keep good employees unless you understand why some have left?

It's clearly more cost-effective and productive to retain a good, key employee than to hire and train a new one…use your money -- and your time – wisely!

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on Tuesday, November 14, 2012. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website www.pasassociates.com and through the PAS Facebook page or by phone at 631-2165.