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Some Northbrook companies finding it tougher to attract younger employees



Downtown Northbrook Subway owner Tony Namrod, (behind counter, second from right), said he's been able to find employees for his store at 1951 Cherry Lane. But some Northbrook business leaders say a bigger challenge is attracting millennials to techy positions. (Irv Leavitt / Pioneer Press)

By **Irv Leavitt · Contact Reporter**
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Who wants to work in [Northbrook](#)?

Increasingly, some say, not millennials.

"A lot of it, I think, is the millennials want to be in the city and don't want to commute very far," said Pat Lederer, head of a Northbrook group starting to look at complaints from businesses having a hard time filling jobs.

"The millennials, they love the city, they don't have cars, they don't want to leave the four-block area around their (apartment)," added Lederer, who heads the Industrial and Commercial Development Commission, a village of Northbrook panel.

Lederer said Northbrook-based STATS, an international sports technology, data and content company, is moving its Northbrook office to downtown Chicago, where it would be more likely to attract the kind of employees it wants. STATS officials declined to answer questions for this story despite multiple attempts to seek comment.

Northbrook and other nearby suburbs have a hard time making millennials happy even if the transportation hurdle is cleared, Deerfield-based economist Aaron Gruen said.

"All towns should make sure they have places that 'make experiences' to attract millennials, starting with shops and restaurants," he said. "And millennials don't need to buy a Northbrook ranch, or someplace grander. They don't have children – dogs and cats are their children."

He said it remains to be seen whether the hundreds of "luxury apartments" springing up around the area will attract millennial employees, or whether they're too expensive.

Pew Research Center defines millennials as those between the ages of 18 and 35 as of 2015.

Andrew Challenger, vice president of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a Chicago-based "employment transitioning" firm, ticked off the roll of big suburban companies that have or are moving much of their operations downtown.

"Motorola, McDonald's, Kraft, Hillshire, ConAgra, Walgreens ... particularly, for some of these companies, it's for IT groups. For the best talent, you have to go to the youngest rung, and they're sticking to the city, more often than not."

The problem with attracting millennials combines with the older problem of filling low-skilled or entry-level jobs in the Northbrook area, Lederer said. First, he said, Northbrook has a teenage population "that doesn't need to work." Then, he said, there's a lack of rapid transportation, a shortage of nearby affordable housing, and wages that don't necessarily overcome those obstacles.

"Northbrook doesn't have good transportation options," Northbrook Chamber of Commerce President Tensley Garris said. "Then you also have to get over the hurdle of how many jobs (there are) between where they are and where we are."

In other words: How good does a Northbrook job have to be for a Chicago resident, for instance, to pass other places where she could also work, in the city, Skokie or Evanston?

Some employers find they have to be flexible, and face similar challenges for non-millennial younger workers.

"Kids have a lot of choices today, and that's good," said Bruce Gonzalez, general manager of Northbrook Sunset Foods. But that means soccer or baseball practice comes before bagging in the store at 1127 Church St.

At least three Northbrook heating, ventilation and air-conditioning repair firms have signs out front looking for

help.

"We need to hire a lot of people in the trades, and most of the people who live on the North Shore don't work in the trades," Dick Hochschild of American Weathermakers, 341 Anthony Trail, said. "We hire from as far as Kenosha, Chicago, McHenry, anywhere we can."

Ed Banczak of Unique Indoor Comfort , 346 Huehl Road, Northbrook, said HVAC hiring is tough nationwide. Lots of technicians went unemployed after the housing crash, and they survived, he said, because "they went into business for themselves," and are now unavailable to hire.

Both Banczak and Hochschild said their real problem is rooted in the lack of high schools with shop classes, especially locally. Few teens are inspired to head for trade school, where some could build better lives than they ever could with college degrees, they said.

Meanwhile, Banczak said, his best sources for employees are shops that mistreat the technicians.

Tony Namrod, owner of the downtown Northbrook Subway sandwich shop, said he has paid employees as much as \$14 an hour, and currently doesn't pay anybody more than \$11. But he has no trouble finding workers to come to 1951 Cherry Lane, he said, some from as far as Franklin Park.

"I'm good to them, and they bring me other employees," he said. "I don't put pressure on them, and I don't force them to do things they don't want to do."

Lederer said that with many millennials, it's hard to get them to drive anywhere, when, close to home, "they have high-rise incubator buildings with exposed brick, beanbag chairs and beer on tap."

Challenger said more hope for the suburbs may be on the horizon: Eventually, millennials will start having children, and like previous generations, they're likely to look to the suburbs.

"Companies are going to have to be flexible," he said. "It may ebb and flow. They may have to reopen those locations they closed five and 10 years ago."

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This story was updated July 27, 2016, to correct the base of operations for Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

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