

Veteran recruiter stresses need to keep skills current

Cathy Searby is chief executive officer of Palo Alto Staffing Services, a company she founded 30 years ago. Palo Alto Staffing is a woman-operated recruitment firm that places executive assistants, office managers, administrative assistants, legal secretaries, receptionists, and accounting and HR professionals. It serves Silicon Valley and the Peninsula, as well as San Francisco and the East Bay. It places temporary, temp-to-hire and direct-hire professionals.

Q: With the change in the economy, including increased unemployment and layoffs, has your business increased?

A: Yes, our business has increased in the first six months of 2008 compared with the first six months of 2007. Typically, we find that in times of economic uncertainty, our temporary division picks up more rapidly and our temp-to-hire and direct-hire business decreases. But we are encouraged to see our temp-to-hire and direct-hire business has dramatically increased over the past two months, which bodes well for people looking for jobs in the valley. We're often an indicator of the economy. I think my company will have a strong second half of the year.

Q: What types of training or education do you see prospective employees in Silicon Valley needing these days? Are people retraining and adding to their skill sets, whether through private programs, university extensions or advanced degrees?

A: There definitely is an increased need for four-year degrees from accredited colleges. Our broadest niche is for executive assistants who are capable of managing busy, top-level executives' schedules. They must be skilled in Microsoft Office products including extensive Outlook scheduling and shared calendaring, setting



CATHY SEARBY

Title: Chief executive officer

Age: 59

Home: Atherton

Education: Bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of North Carolina

Path to Silicon Valley: My husband was recruited out of the U.S. Department of State for a position in Los Altos.

First job: Gucci boutique on Bond Street in London

Best biz book you've read: Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People"

Biz hero: My father, who was a successful politician and entrepreneur

Best investment you've made: Buying my own business

Hardest thing about your job: Dealing with downturns in the economy. I am proud of retaining my top eight recruiters, most of whom have been with me for more than 20 years each. We always seem to emerge stronger than ever as the economy stabilizes and have much less competition, because fewer staffing firms are left when the economy finally turns around.

up video conferences, being able to use Word extensively and have top composition and communication skills, both written and verbal. They must be able to stay connected with traveling executives via PDAs.

Q: From a staffing-agency perspective, how does the Silicon Valley job market break down these days?

A: Technology is definitely still king. However, we see other rising sectors such as green tech, biotech and social networking firms advancing rapidly.

Q: What advice can you give people to be competitive?

A: Clearly know what talents and skills you have to offer an employer. Prepare,

prepare, prepare for each interview with thorough Internet research, and do quick follow-ups in some personal fashion -- through e-mail or letter. When following up, be sure to describe the reasons why you would be a good fit for their company and let them know that you will be calling to find out what the next step would be. Looking for a job is a full-time job in itself, and it is imperative you pull out all the stops in networking, researching desired companies, and following up aggressively after each interview. Use alumni organizations that have career centers and career coaches to help assist you in finding a job via their alumni network. The greatest networking opportunities are at your fingertips with LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook and other social networking sites.