

Laid-Off Bobcat Workers Don't Miss Their Jobs

Christopher Bjorke, Associated Press Writer

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Six months later, there is no boss and no time clock and the sun is overhead, instead of a factory roof.

"I love the freedom. The biggest thing is I'm in control of my own destiny," said Dale Lang, a former Bobcat employee who now works for himself, running a lawn care business. "If I fail, it's my own fault."

After nearly 10 years of factory work, much of it on the night shift, Lang says he can make ends meet serving a reliable list of clients. He counts himself one of the lucky ones of the almost 500 workers laid off in December when Bobcat shut down its production plant.

"There are still a lot of people out of work, a lot of people gunning for the same jobs," he said. "My fellow employees weren't so fortunate to have something to fall back on."

The predicament of being a former Bobcat employee is to be an industrial worker in a town where the biggest employers are hospitals and state government. They have the choices of vying for the few jobs in the area that call for their skills, taking something lower-paying, going back to school or going out of town to powerplants, oil fields or other Bobcat facilities.

Or, some try to make it on their own.

"To be out of that place is fantastic," said Tom Dutton, who worked at the plant since 1998. He is now getting by on his own portable welding business and raising cattle near Menoken. "I haven't talked to anyone who's missed it, (except for) the paycheck and the benefits," he said.

Dutton, 45, ran his welding operation while working at Bobcat, a job he took with the intention of only staying a year before he settled into a weekend shift that was convenient to his side work. He says he stays busy enough without Bobcat and is able to make ends meet, though he misses the company's health and other benefits.

"I'm just adjusting, making do with what I've got," said Dutton. "I think I'm doing good. ... Time will tell."

Other former employees with less to fall back upon can try the more typical paths to a new job: checking with Job Service, revising resumes, practicing interview skills and hoping for something to happen.

Job Service does not have numbers on how many former Bobcat employees it has

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worked with or how many have found permanent work. Phil Davis, who manages customer service for Job Service in Bismarck, said there was a surge of workers early in the year who were looking for help finding a job. Job Service increased the number of interview training sessions it offers each month, and it has helped around 50 former workers get money for job training through the federal Workforce Investment Act.

"It's tough to track" where the workers are at now, Davis said. "We've seen quite a few come back and tell us their success stories."

Dennis Kessel was one of the workers who decided to return to school. He got 12 weeks of welding training paid for through Job Service.

"I didn't want to sit at home and wait for a call," said Kessel, who was a welder at Bobcat but is learning other welding skills at Lynnes Welding Training, a Fargo welding school that opened a Bismarck branch about six months ago.

He is hoping to find work at power plants in the region or some structural or maintenance work in town. Originally from Dickinson, Kessel, 53, worked in oil fields in the 1980s, but is not eager to uproot himself and go west or to commute from Bismarck.

"There wasn't really much out there because I wanted to stick around Bismarck-Mandan," he said. "I could possibly get a job in the oil patch. I know that."

Of his former co-workers, some have pursued jobs with power plants, others have commercial drivers licenses, and some have had to take minimum wage work, Kessel said. Kessel's wife works, so he has an income he can rely on.

"I have it fairly good, but I know a lot of people out there who are struggling," Kessel said. "You can't be bitter. You just have to move on and succeed with something else."

Some people who worked in the Bismarck plant have stayed with the company and have gone to work in other Bobcat facilities in Gwinner, Wahpeton or Litchfield, Minn.

Tom Ricker, president of the United Steelworkers local in Gwinner, said that 55 hourly workers from Bismarck signed up for jobs in Gwinner and around 15 took jobs there. Laura Ness Owens, a Bobcat spokeswoman, said that about 50 hourly and salaried workers from Bismarck have taken jobs at the company's three plants in North Dakota and Minnesota.

Another worker with a fallback plan is Kent Zins, who, like Lang, runs a lawn care business. Not working nights and being able to take his kids to school in the morning has been a welcome change for him. A former laser operator, he also does not mind trading the smoky factory for the outdoors.

"Those nights were getting long, too, toward the end," he said.

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Before the closing was announced, rumors circulated constantly among employees, and some began making plans suspecting that unemployment was near, Zins said.

"You didn't know from one day to the next if you're getting laid off," he said. "At least this way, you know you have a job."

Like Lang, Zins considers himself one of the lucky ones. Both of them say they miss the camaraderie of their co-workers and they try to maintain connections with each other.

"People still ask me questions about them," said Lang. "It's something that's going to be with me for quite a while."

Even if Bobcat is still part of him, Lang, 37, now enjoys having more time for himself and is thankful that he got a chance to test himself to see if he could make it on his own. So far, he believes he is making it.

"If you get up in the morning and go to work, you're going to make it," he said. "It's not always about money. It's about happiness, too."

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