

Published: Feb 23, 2009 12:30 AM  
Modified: Feb 23, 2009 05:41 AM

## Call centers bring new job connection

### Hickory finds some salve for big losses

**HANNAH MITCHELL, The Charlotte Observer**  
[Comment on this story](#)

HICKORY - In an area long dependent on furniture, textiles and, more recently, cable manufacturing, business recruiters have started building a new and entirely different sector that's employing hundreds of people: call centers.

As employers across the country continue to shed jobs, Hickory in recent months has landed two of the state's biggest projects -- the 500-worker Convergys in an old textile manufacturing headquarters and a planned 900-worker call center.

The number of new jobs is small compared with the scores lost in the manufacturing sector. And though call centers sometimes start out employees at a wage lower than the regional average, and can have high turnover and stress, recruiters say they're a natural fit and help soften the blow of relentless layoffs.

Recruiters say the secret to attracting them is simply having the right buildings ready for the call centers to occupy.

Catawba landed the two call centers in 2008, and business recruiters say more could follow.

In June, recruiters announced the Ohio-based Convergys Corp. call center. Then, in December, they announced that Atlanta-based Covation LLC will move into a Hickory spec building constructed to lure a call center, promising to hire 913 workers in two years.

Recruiters and industry analysts say expansion of call centers, combined with the area's available work force, customer-friendly workers and sometimes cheaper wages than bigger cities, make the Catawba Valley attractive to companies looking to place new centers.

"Hickory, if you look at the demographics, there's no competition," said Kenny McDonald, executive vice president of Charlotte Regional Partnership, a 12-county business recruiter that worked with Catawba County to attract Convergys and Covation. "They can get employees to come to them."

#### **New jobs needed**

Catawba County, which draws workers from six counties in Western North Carolina, needs a lot of jobs to replace those it lost over the past decade. Call centers can help provide those positions, said Scott Millar, president of Catawba County Economic Development Corp., the county's business recruiter.

Business leaders knew they had to diversify after factory jobs kept moving overseas and the dot-com meltdown forced cable makers to slash their work forces. So they worked with the Charlotte Regional Partnership to court nonmanufacturing employers.

A consultant's study in 2007 showed the Hickory market had plenty of people willing and able to work in customer-service jobs; 62 percent had experience in that field, four percentage points higher than the median for other areas the firm had studied.

The benefits for the local economy are so attractive to this troubled area that state and local officials are willing to risk incentives on even unproven companies. Covation, for instance, lined up \$6.4 million in state and local backing, including a \$600,000 state grant, four months after it

was incorporated.

State officials defend the incentives by touting the jobs Covation will create in an area where unemployment topped 10 percent in December, higher than state and national averages.

And the potential for more call centers in the Hickory area is good, say local recruiters.

More sectors are using them to focus on customer service, if only to retain the customer base they have in the shaky economy, McDonald said, adding that most people still prefer to speak with a person rather than try to get help online.

Outsourcing of customer service, a \$20 billion market, is growing by about 5 percent a year, an industry analyst said, as companies try to maintain strong brand images while spending less money.

Though some call-center planners look for a bilingual population to fill a portion of their agent staffing, particularly those who speak Spanish and English, McDonald said they mostly want employees who speak clearly and without much of an accent.

### **Southern hospitality**

Inside the Convergys call center off U.S. 70, employees in comfortable clothes sit in banks of cubicles, headphones on and hands stroking computer keyboards as they answer calls from customers.

Convergys operations manager Connie Orr said some companies like to contract with centers in the South because of natives' empathetic natures.

"You call into some place usually because you're upset," she said. "A lot of people from our area kind of have more understanding, for instance: 'I can see how you'd be frustrated,' or 'I'm so sorry to hear your bill is too high this month.' "

Many of its Hickory employees were laid off from furniture jobs and had been unemployed for up to six months before getting Convergys positions, Holcombe said. They make \$9.50 per hour starting out, plus benefits. At Covation, local economic development officials say, the average salary for the work force will be \$34,500, not including benefits.

The average hourly wage in the Hickory area is \$15.68, according to the Western Piedmont Council of Governments.

Agent Marcell Miller, 58, represents the ex-furniture demographic. She was laid off from a furniture job in Georgia and had moved to Hickory to be with her new husband.

"I love it," she said. "It was really challenging to me to learn. I wasn't too tech-savvy, but with the training they give us, it's getting easier the more I do it."

**All rights reserved. This copyrighted material may not be published, broadcast or redistributed in any manner.**

[Comics, crosswords and coupons... only in The N&O print edition. \*\*Subscribe Now!\*\*](#)

## **JOB OUTLOOK**

**GROWING FASTER THAN OTHER OCCUPATIONS:** Customer-service jobs are expected to grow by 25 percent, or 545,000 jobs, by 2016, far faster than average for all occupations.

**JOB DETAILS:** Work at call centers can be repetitious and stressful, with little time between calls. Long periods at computers can strain the body and eyes, and some employees must work nights, weekends or holidays. But resolving customer complaints can be rewarding, and the sector suits flexible schedules and provides a clean working environment.

Most of the jobs require a high school diploma, though employers are starting to look for candidates with some college education.

BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS