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EDITORIAL

The Marshall Plan

Sometimes, my native state of Missouri gets it right — not often, mind you, but sometimes. Take jobs, for instance. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Missouri, with a population of about 5 million, lost more jobs—either 23,200 or 51,800, depending on which crooked bureaucrat you believe—in June of this year than any other state in the nation. By comparison, California, with a population of more than 35 million, lost only 17,000 jobs in the same period.

Flummoxed by news such as this, the best ideas that Missouri, Ohio, Washington, Wisconsin, Maryland, and other such states have come up with to dam the flow of jobs—many of which are being out-sourced offshore—is to propose toothless laws that will be largely ignored in any event. For its part, Missouri did issue an executive order that prohibits state agencies from awarding contracts to vendors who intend on performing work outside the U.S.—except where denying the contract would result in economic hardship to the state (http://www.sos.mo.gov/library/reference/orders/2004/co04_009.asp).

But talk's cheap and Keri DeWitt, president of Los Angeles-based Teresis (<http://www.teresis.com>) and a native of the small Missouri town of Marshall, wanted to do more than just talk. Teresis, which provides digital workflow tools for the television industry, teamed up with Rapidtext (a nationwide transcription service) and local organizations in Marshall to use high-speed Internet connections to bring jobs to the rural community. Initially, the project will be hiring 20 to 40 transcribers who download television "dailies" (unedited raw video) onto their home PCs, view the dailies using Teresis Transcription Client software, and create word-for-word transcripts from the video. Transcripts are then sent back to the show and uploaded into the Teresis Production Portal, where producers and editors use the transcripts to access the dailies and assemble important story points into a paper cut, which is then routed to editors to assemble the final cut of the program. The process involves converting dailies from videotape into digital files that are loaded in parallel into editing systems and sent over the Internet to transcribers. DeWitt's software cut the time required to produce a 30-minute tape from 5-6 hours to 2-3 hours.

Previously, to get this work done, DeWitt used offshore transcription services. "It was lucrative and attractive at first because of the margins," says DeWitt. However, she became increasingly frustrated with the quality of work (offshore transcribers didn't have a grasp of American colloquialisms), work ethics (transcribers often quit at the end of their shift, even when in the middle of a job), and the difficulties in coping with time differences around the globe. "It was a headache to manage," she explains. All this led DeWitt to the realization that the same technologies that create jobs offshore can be used to create jobs locally. With that in mind, she contacted Roy Hunter, Executive Director of Marshall-Saline Development Corporation, who ran with the idea as a way of creating jobs in the rural Missouri community.

The opportunity of bringing jobs back to her hometown had special significance for DeWitt. "Marshall has been hit hard in the last 15 years," she says. "There aren't many options available other than minimum wage work for many of the women there. We need to think creatively on how we can bring offshore business back to the US."

The Central Missouri Technology and Skills Training Center—an organization jointly created by the Marshall-Saline Development Corporation, Missouri Valley Community Action Agency, Missouri Valley College, and the Saline Industries Council—stepped forward to fund, equip, and staff a job-training center. Teresis provides the actual training and the jobs. Depending on their skill level, workers can make good money without ever leaving home. "It is a little more expensive," admits DeWitt. "We give up some margin, but we're still within our margins, and it makes good business sense to do what we're doing. Plus, we are providing jobs to people who really appreciate them."

What this Marshall plan points out is that some problems are too simple for government to solve. When you don't have to cater to special interests and petty politics, a commitment to do something good for all the right reasons is sometimes enough. It also underscores that building successful businesses and benefiting the community aren't mutually exclusive. And sometimes, all it takes to make all this happen is one person with creativity, willpower, an understanding of technology, and a desire to do what's right.

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