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CROP CAREERS

THE HYDROPONIC INDUSTRY OFFERS A SEED OF HOPE TO ECONOMICALLY STRUGGLING MILLENNIALS AND MORE

BY GARY ANGLEBRANDT

College graduates and other college-age job seekers have probably had enough reminders that they're entering a bleak job market. But to put things in perspective, here are the latest numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: While the overall U.S. unemployment rate has dropped to 7.6% in

April 2013 (from the March 2009 high of 10%), the unemployment rate for people age 20-24 is nearly double at 13.3%. The same rate for all millennials (typically defined as age 18-29) is 13.1%. That's an entire generation of workers who just aren't working. Or they are working, but for far less money than their Gen X peers made before them.

One often overlooked bright spot in this grim picture is the hydroponics industry. Demand for organic, locally grown products shows no signs of abating and has led to some encouraging numbers, as reported by market researcher IBISWorld Inc. in a series of recent reports:

- From 2007 to 2012, revenue for the hydroponic equipment retail industry rose 7.7%, with total revenue reaching about \$540 million. Annual growth of 5.8% is expected through 2017.
- The hydroponic crop farming industry for fruits and vegetables grew 7.8% from 2006 through 2011, when it hit total revenue of more than \$500 million, and it is expected to grow 4.4% annually through 2016.

The industry is still small – Starbucks alone brings in more than \$3 billion each quarter – but numbers like these mean growth and potential for advancement. For example, on the retail equipment side, no single company holds market share of over 1%. Get a foot in the right door and an ambitious worker could end up leading an expanding business.

One entrepreneur hopes to help young people start their own franchised growing businesses. Erik Cutter, who runs Alegria Farm, a hydroponic farm in Laguna Beach, California, employs workers in the 18-25 age range and plans to begin training potential franchisees this year.

"I don't believe we can make this movement happen fast enough by hiring employees," says Cutter, who plans to license his business model to up to 15 franchisees this year. The franchisees would get training in business management, financing and marketing.

Cutter looks for college students and graduates in the field of environmental science. "These guys are coming out with nowhere to go," he says.

Brent Morreale, a 26-year-old intern at Alegria Farm, got into the job a few months ago after working in construction. "I saw myself doing that for a long time, but my heart just wasn't in it. With this, I really feel it's doing something for me," says Morreale, who plans to start his own business in the field.



Brent Morreale

"THERE'S GOING TO BE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL PEOPLE – AND THAT'S IN MONTHS, NOT YEARS."

But it's not just young people who are being drawn to the economic opportunities of organic and hydroponic growing. Many older workers facing challenges in the job market or looking for a midlife career change are finding a fantastic second act in this industry as well.

Chris Chapin, 62, previously worked in insurance and as a wholesaler for sporting goods equipment and has an economics degree from Stanford University.

"This is a growth industry here, no question," he insists. "There's going to be opportunities for entrepreneurial people – and that's in months, not years."



Chris Chapin

His colleague, 43-year-old Duane Allee, has a degree in environmental science and worked in labs for 12 years. But after that work became an assembly-line task of sending samples out the door, he grew restless.

"Eventually the nobility of that job faded," he says.

Allee signed up for an internship at Alegria, not knowing exactly what he plans to do in the field, only knowing that it will yield new chances for something positive. He says he is learning all he can for now and will figure out the rest as he goes.

The growing industry offers entry-level jobs that can lead to management positions. Helena DePaola, owner of Indoor Outdoor Gardener, a hydroponics supply store in Brooklyn that has been open since 1974, hired the current store manager out of high school. He's been at the shop for 22 years.

DePaola explains that workers on the retail side of the industry can expect to earn \$9 an hour when they start, and managers get up to \$60,000 a year.

Of course, the greatest benefit of working in hydroponics is the potential to create positive change in the health of people and the environment. For many, getting their foot in the door of a growing industry is an added bonus.

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