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Agency provides temporary workers sense of security

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The Patriot Ledger [Correction published 7/28/04: A story on Monday did not fully identify the owner of **Abbott Personnel** Services, Joanne Grady Savard of Duxbury. Savard uses her maiden name, Joanne Grady, for business purposes.] For nearly 20 years, Joanne Grady [Correction: Joanne Grady Savard] has been offering temporary workers what they crave the most: a sense of security. Grady, owner of Boston-based employment agency Abbot Personnel Services, says she has managed to build job stability for her roster of temp workers in a sector defined by fleeting relationships and constantly changing environments.

"People have always thought of temporary workers as disposable personnel," said Grady, a Duxbury mother of two. "(But) I hire temps and I know how critical they are."

Grady's company, which also places permanent employees, was one of the first employment agencies in Boston to offer health insurance and other perks to short-term workers.

And by building her roster of temps slowly and screening candidates for personality traits as well as job skills, Grady said Abbott's turnover rate is one of the lowest in the industry. "Its really a personality... match that makes the (temporary) placement stay," she said.

Grady, who spent 17 years as an administrator at various Boston area firms, started **Abbott Personnel** in 1985. Back then, the temporary help industry was in the midst of a sharp upswing.

"My company grew very swiftly because the economy was so strong," she said. "Companies were hiring (temps) left and right. The large corporations, the Fidelitys, the Banks of New England, all of them."

After five years of steep growth, Grady's business hit its first big hurdles in the economic downturn of the early 1990s.

"Everyone in Boston was struggling," she said of the staffing industry.

At about the same time, large franchise agencies, such as Kelly Services and Adecco, rushed into the market, she said.

Eventually, competition from web sites, such as monster.com, drained much of her already shrinking client list. "HR departments were getting resumes off the Monster board," Grady said.

Fortunately, that threat turned out to be a short-lived. Businesses were so flooded with Internet resumes that they quickly developed a fresh appreciation for employment agencies' screening processes. Now, as the economy returns to life and temps become an increasingly permanent fixture in the corporate landscape, Abbott is growing steadily again.

She and her 10-person staff place between 85 and 90 temps a week and serve about 250 clients each year.

Health care, biotech and construction companies are among the many kinds of firms that knock on her door with increasing frequency, Grady said.

"They've got a very, very personalized service," said client Peter Salisbury, owner of Boston-based Mercury Business Services. "It's clear she cares a lot about her employees." For Grady, the swelling ranks of temps on the business landscape are a constant source of inspiration.

"I see temporary staff as courageous," Grady said. "They're going into environments where they're meeting new people all the time. They need to navigate different locations around the city.... They need to continually impress new employers all the time. So I have a great respect for that." Lucy Sutherland may be reached at lsutherland@ledger.com.

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