

Turning Blue into Gold: Tracking the Success of TrueBlue, Inc.

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Although hurt by the economic downturn, Tacoma's TrueBlue, Inc. is on an upswing, seeing economic growth and receiving recognition from Forbes as one of the 100 Most Trustworthy Companies in America.

TrueBlue, Inc. is a low-profile company with a big impact.

Headquartered in an historic downtown Tacoma highrise once home to Weyerhaeuser, TrueBlue is the largest blue-collar staffing company in the United States. Its reach is even international.

And while TrueBlue is not exactly a household word, you've almost certainly heard of its oldest and biggest brand — Labor Ready.

FROM LABOR READY TO TRUEBLUE

Originally a small blue-collar staffing agency in Kent in 1989, Labor Ready quickly expanded into multiple branches.

Labor Ready was and is a valuable service not only for people looking for a paycheck, but also for employers who frequently have a difficult time finding people willing to do tough blue collar jobs with high turnover.

"Through about 1993-94, we were a regional-based player here in the Northwest," said Steve Cooper, TrueBlue's chief executive officer. "We had also spread down to California and opened offices there."

In 1996, the company went public and spread nationwide, developing a strong presence in the East and South. Labor Ready was listed on the New York Stock Exchange for the first time in 1998. Wall Street took notice of the company when it became that year's fastest growing company on the exchange.

"There were some exciting times in Labor Ready in the late '90s," said Cooper. "We hit a peak of 900 offices. We had 800 in the U.S., 50 in Canada and 50 in the U.K. around 2005."

In 2005, Labor Ready began purchasing other companies and retaining their brand names. First was CLP Resources,



Steve Cooper is CEO of TrueBlue, Inc.

a Reno, Nev., company that found work for skilled workers including carpenters, electricians, welders and pipe fitters. Then came PlaneTechs, a supplier of mechanics and aviation technicians for customers including Boeing.

Next on board was Spartan Staffing. Strong in the South and Midwest, Spartan provided workers for light manufacturers and the food industry.

Finally, Centerline, a California truck driver staffing company, joined the TrueBlue family, and began expanding into other states.

In the midst of this major expansion, Labor Ready officially changed its name to TrueBlue, Inc., reflecting its multiple brands within the blue-collar staffing market.

"Since 2007, we've expanded these companies," said Cooper. "Labor Ready is just one half of our business now." All told, TrueBlue now has 2,500 employees nationwide, including 250 at its Tacoma headquarters. And the number of people it matches with work assignments each year is estimated at an astounding 400,000.

A SENSE OF MISSION

Steve Cooper was a natural for the job of leading a blue-collar staffing company.

“I grew up in Idaho,” said Cooper. “I worked mostly in manual labor all the way through college whether it was in construction, agricultural or working in a warehouse. I saw my friends and family in these types of jobs.”

When he first came to the company on a consulting assignment in the late 1990s, he was instantly drawn to its mission.

“My second day here I was out in one of the branch operations, learning the business, seeing 100 people get paid that afternoon. I absolutely saw myself and the people I knew in those folks’ eyes,” said Cooper.

“The passion I had for the business right out of the chute was huge. I totally fell in love with the company. The power of making a difference in someone’s life and giving them the opportunity to go to work each day completely drives me.”

Cooper was Labor Ready’s chief financial officer until 2005, when he became president. He became CEO in 2006.

One thing Cooper finds particularly satisfying is seeing his temps become full-time employees at his customers’ companies, something that happens frequently.

“We’re happy to help people improve their lives, get on their feet, find a full-time job, move forward,” said Cooper.

Unlike some staffing agencies, TrueBlue erects no barriers to its customers hiring its temps.

Finding jobs for its temps, however, became difficult for TrueBlue during the early part of the current economic downturn.

“From our peak of 2006, by the beginning of 2009, we were down 40 percent,” said Cooper. “Staffing is a very cyclical industry. We go up and down with the economy.”

But the staffing industry was a leading indicator for the recession.

“We knew we were headed into a recession as early as 2006, as the housing market started to struggle in Nevada, Florida and Southern California,” said Cooper. “An employer will send temporary staffing workers home first and stop ordering temporary employees.”



“Companies either get stronger or weaker during a recession. No one stays the same. And TrueBlue got stronger.”

—Steve Cooper

AT A GLANCE

- TrueBlue’s roots are in Labor Ready, a Kent blue-collar staffing agency founded in 1989.
- TrueBlue consists of five brands - Labor Ready, CLP Resources, Plane Techs, Spartan Staffing and Centerline.
- TrueBlue now has 2,500 employees nationwide, including 250 at its Tacoma headquarters. Each year, the company matches 400,000 people with work assignments.
- More than 225,000 businesses of all sizes throughout the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico use Labor Ready when they need a dependable source of labor.
- While TrueBlue’s brands are primarily temporary staffing services, the company erects no barriers to its temps developing full-time employee relationships with the employers they meet on temp assignments.
- Spartan Staffing maintains 60 branch offices in 11 states.
- TrueBlue’s revenues declined by 40 percent during the recession, but the company is now in a recovery mode with 20 percent growth.

Conversely, TrueBlue is now a leading indicator of better times.

“When customers start seeing their own businesses grow, they turn to temporary staffing,” said Cooper. “We’re now on the nice side of the cycle. Blue collar employees are the very first to be called back when employment starts moving. We’re growing at 20 percent now.”

A TRUSTED COMPANY


An added incentive for employers to deal with TrueBlue is its expertise in compliance with federal and state regulations. For example, if a Labor Ready temp works on your construction site, you can be sure that he’ll have his immigration papers in order and be legally able to work in the United States.

“We’re guardians of compliance for the state and federal government,” said Cooper.

TrueBlue is also a leader in financial transparency and reporting to the public. Forbes recently recognized this level of openness by naming TrueBlue one of the 100 Most Trustworthy Companies in America. On a scale of 100, TrueBlue scored a perfect 100.

“It’s exciting and an honor to receive that recognition,” said Cooper.

Today, things are looking up at TrueBlue. More diversified than ever before and no longer so dependent on the housing industry as it was in its first 15 years, it is poised to grow as the economy recovers.

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Centerline
www.centerlinedrivers.com

CLP Resources
www.clp.com

Forbes’ 100 Most Trustworthy Companies in America
<http://bit.ly/cajD53>

Labor Ready
www.laborready.com

PlaneTechs
www.planetechs.com

Spartan Staffing
www.spartanstaffing.com

TrueBlue, Inc.
www.trueblueinc.com

A TRUEBLUE TIMELINE

- 1989** Labor Ready founded in Kent.
- 1993** Joins AWB.
- Mid 1990s** Expands from Northwest into California.
- 1996** Goes public.
- 1998** Listed on New York Stock Exchange, becomes fastest growing company on the exchange.
- Late 1990s** Expands throughout United States, Canada and United Kingdom. Steve Cooper joins as chief financial officer.
- 2005** Steve Cooper becomes president. Acquires CLP Resources.
- 2006** Steve Cooper becomes chief executive officer. Company begins experiencing first signs of recession with downturn in housing industry.
- 2007** Acquires PlaneTechs. Changes name to TrueBlue, Inc.
- 2008** Acquires Spartan Staffing and Centerline.
- 2010** Begins pulling out of recession. Named one of Forbes’ 100 Most Trustworthy Companies in America.