Continued from previous page

grow most rapidly is difficult because of the rate of economic change, officials say.

"It's always a really hard question. It's a good one to ask, but it's not a particularly simple one to answer," Gardner said. "It always seems to be the case it's the thing that surprises you that ends up being the big driver."

Leisure and hospitality is one of the region's assets, Gardner says, but the most important impact on jobs might be indirect.

"From an economic perspective I tend to think that the difficulty is that tourism and hospitality doesn't tend to have a lot of high-paying jobs, but it's enormously important to quality of life," he said. "If you have an economy that's becoming more and more footloose every day—more and more companies and jobs (are) able to locate someplace else—then having the Eastman School of Music can be a tremendous incentive" for companies to stay here.

The components of a fast-growing sector are numerous and can include "a focus on knowledge goods and services, synergistic activities between the trinity of higher education, the private sector and enlightened government, both locally and in Albany, and an ability to retain talented professionals," said Amitrajeet Batabyal, the Arthur J. Gosnell professor of economics at Rochester Institute of Technology.

Some reasons given for changing tides in employment are New York's tax structure, the interaction between traditional manufacturing and newer knowledge-based industries, and Rochester's ability to position itself competitively in the world economy, Batabyal said.

An emerging factor that could play a significant role in future job creation is adoption of integrated systems. Harnessing the "Internet of things" will create new markets, experts say.

"This Internet of things stuff—I know that's a real buzzword—we don't really know what it means exactly," Gardner said. "I don't really care whether my toaster is connected to the Internet. A lot of these innovations start small, but the fact that we still have a fairly deep bench in Rochester around telecommunications and around software matters a lot."

"I think a lot of (these) integrated systems, you couldn't have talked about 10 years ago as a potential industry," said Nabil Nasr, associate provost and director of the Golisano Institute for Sustainability at RIT. "We're going to see a lot of home automation, a lot of things that deal with communication, to home automation to smart buildings, and I think this is more of a down-the-road opportunity for businesses to evolve. I see it as an opportunity for our region to create jobs for the next 10 years or so."

Data, more than ever, will dictate much of employment's future, experts say.

"You look at the general trend of everything becoming more connected—a lot of data, data mining and big data—everything is connected, everything is tracked, and that's all being networked," said Todd Oldham, vice president of the Economic Development and Innovative Workforce Services Office at Monroe Community College. "It's clearly going to continue to create opportunities and probably eliminate some opportunities. It's that continued drive forward with technology heavily based on the connectivity, the convergent factor."

Rochester's well-educated community should help it in the long-term, experts say.

"In addition to higher education and the health care sector, the sector that will drive employment growth the most in the future is the knowledge sector, broadly construed," Batabyal said. "This is because after the (decline) of the Big Three (Eastman Kodak Co., Xerox Corp. and Bausch & Lomb Inc.), the Rochester area has been left with a large pool of highly skilled professionals who have generally decided to stay in the Rochester area and to use their skills to start businesses of their own."

Conway agrees.

"I think one of the greatest strengths of this region is a highly educated populace," she said. "We also have this (expansion of) high-tech jobs that are growing largely through small, entrepreneurial companies. I think with a highly educated population (Rochester) becomes more of a center of creativity. We are poised to tap into that with our workforce."

The lines between companies and the job skills they require are becoming blurred, making the next five months nearly as hazy as the next five years, Gardner said.

"Increasingly we're seeing convergence in a lot of sectors," he said. "Because so much of what happens in any company is IT-driven, you'll end up seeing the same kind of skills being required for some very dissimilar companies. So that also makes the task of prediction difficult."

kfeltner@rbj.net / 585-546-8303