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**LAYOFFS »**

## Closure leaves 197 without jobs

*Internet phone provider SunRocket's call center shuts down.*

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News-Leader

Workers showed up as usual Monday at Bell Industries, but by early afternoon the 197 employees at the call center were out of a job.

SunRocket, a Vienna, Va.-based Internet phone service company, is folding, and Bell Industries is closing the Springfield facility on Primrose Street, which has been serving SunRocket exclusively.

The abrupt closure came barely a year after the two companies reopened the former MCI call center.

The news was particularly uplifting then, because two months earlier MCI had announced plans to close the call center and lay off 400 workers.

Now the building is empty again.

Bell Industries employees say they knew SunRocket had troubles but were still surprised at the sudden shutdown.

So was Alice Simpson, who works with displaced workers at Missouri Career Center.

On Monday afternoon, former Bell Industries employees were streaming into her office, prompting Simpson to call their employer, she said.

The Bell Industries employees say both SunRocket and the call center are "gone."

It is unclear what led to the failure at SunRocket, how long Bell Industries has been aware of the woes and whether its relationship with SunRocket had any bearing on the resignation of Bell Industries' CEO on Friday.

"I have zero information," said Roger Pondel, a spokesman for Indianapolis-based Bell Industries, on Monday evening.

Calls to SunRocket's corporate public relations department were not returned Monday.

The recording from its customer service line says: "We are no longer taking customer service or sales calls. Goodbye."

Online discussion boards — where former employees, industry experts and customers have been posting questions, answers and speculation regarding the troubled phone service company — indicate Sherwood Partners LLC in Palo Alto, Calif., would manage the shutdown of SunRocket, assisting with refund and billing issues.

But spokesman Martin Pichinson said Sherwood had no comment.

"Whatever I tell you will be wrong," he said. "We don't know. ... Lots of things are in play. Nothing is in cement yet."

It was last July when Bell Industries and SunRocket, self-described as the second fastest-growing Internet-based company in the nation, announced they would reopen the former MCI center in Springfield.

Bell Industries would staff the center with a starting pay of \$8 per hour, and the employees would work exclusively for SunRocket.

SunRocket provided VoIP, or Voice-over-Internet Protocol, which allows consumers to place inexpensive phone calls through the Internet.

A better-known company that offers similar services is Vonage.

The Springfield facility started with 150 employees with a goal to reach 500 at the end of 2006.

That goal, former employees said, was never reached, but they said the center employed anywhere between 200 and 300 workers by Monday.

SunRocket also had more than 200,000 customers, estimated former employees, noting Springfield had the only call center for SunRocket.

The company initially had operated call centers in Canada and the Philippines.

Recently, the company began to cut staff.

"We heard in the last few days something might be coming up," said Kelley Ducusin, a former employee. "We knew that SunRocket was looking for buyers, looking for funding."

Then came Monday, when Ducusin and her co-workers were told the Springfield facility would be shut down immediately.

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