

Help Wanted, But Jobless Need Not Apply?

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Buried in recent tumultuous headlines about debt-ceiling debates, stock market plunges, predictions of double-dip recession and Standard & Poor's downgrading of the nation's credit rating was an unexpectedly positive jobs report.

Nationally, there was some evidence that companies are beginning to hire. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a net increase of 117,000 new jobs in July, with the unemployment rate dipping to 9.1 percent from 9.2 percent in June. Unfortunately, in Kern County, we saw a slight uptick in the jobless rate. This news has come with a big "but...."

The same government agency compiled data for Congress' Joint Economic Committee that demonstrated the growing challenge of the "long-term unemployed."

As of June, 6.3 million Americans had been unemployed for at least 27 weeks; 4.4 million of those Americans have been unemployed for over a year. According to the state Employment Development Department, 738,000 Californians have been out of work for at least a year, up from 579,000 last year.

To put these figures in perspective, the 6.3 million nationwide figure reported this month by the Bureau of Labor Statistics is a huge increase from the 1.1 million similarly long-term unemployed the bureau reported in 2007. And these unemployment figures do not include jobseekers who have become discouraged and have dropped out of the market.

Common wisdom has been that it is easier to find a job when you still have one. As a result, many workers will hold on to a job they may not like, while they search for a replacement.

But in this era of downsizing and business closures, many Americans, including those in Kern County, have not been given the luxury of hanging on to their jobs. Many times, through no fault of their own, they have been thrown into the ranks of the unemployed. And with job creation slow, at best, that is where they have stayed for months and months.

Businesses have long resisted hiring the long-term unemployed. Now an increasing trend is for some companies to refuse to even accept job applications from anyone who is unemployed.

HELP WANTED: Only the employed need to apply.

Shunning the unemployed is not being done subtly. "Help Wanted" advertisements in newspapers and online hiring giants increasingly include the exclusion. And so far, the practice is not illegal. The unemployed is not a "class" that is protected from what some would call discrimination.

That could change. The state of New Jersey recently passed a law outlawing job ads that bar the unemployed from applying. Other states, including New York and Michigan, are considering similar laws. And the Fair Employment Opportunity Act of 2011 was recently introduced in the House of Representatives to prohibit employers and employment agencies from excluding job applicants solely because they are unemployed.

But the fact remains that the exclusion now exists, and both the unemployed and long-term unemployed are having an increasingly difficult time finding work.

Is this fair? Are companies justified in excluding the unemployed from their applicant pools? Yes and no.

With so many applicants for so few jobs, overwhelmed hiring staffs must quickly screen applications, inviting perhaps 10 people out of 300 who have applied to come in for interviews. Often computer software is used to filter applications, using criteria, such as “unemployed,” to screen out “undesirable” applicants.

With the long-term unemployed, the reasoning can be that the longer an applicant is out of work, the more obsolete his or her job skills become. A long-term unemployed worker may also lose confidence, have mounting financial problems, and lack the initiative to transition back into an 8-to-5 workplace.

But screening out the unemployed, even the long-term unemployed, is stereotyping that may result in an organization missing the opportunity to hire a top-notch worker. It also jeopardizes the local and national economic recovery, which depends on people going back to work.

What questions should companies ask when considering hiring a long-term unemployed applicant?

What have you been doing while off work? If the applicant can tell you the past seasons’ story lines for the television show “CSI: Miami,” you may have cause for concern! Value answers such as starting a business, returning to school or becoming certified in a new skill. This is a worker who does not want to waste time, is innovative and is adaptable.

How have you kept your job skills current? The answers you are looking for are volunteering, performing contract work, or completing an internship. There are many ways a laid off worker can keep and increase job skills, while looking for a new job.

Can you give me references? Ask the applicant for the names of several people who can testify to his or her job skills, experience and efforts to keep current, or expand skills while out of work. Likely these names will go beyond the basic listing of past employers.

Why were you let go from your previous job? This is a logical question in any economic environment. But don’t settle for “laid off,” or “workforce reduction.” Try to determine when in the previous employer’s lay-off cycle the applicant was let go. Performance problems may be indicated if the applicant was the first to be laid off, rather than the last.

Interviewing only already-employed workers doesn’t guarantee that you’re making a “good hire.” We all know people – even in these tough economic times – who are perpetual job hoppers.

It's always wise to take careful steps when considering applicants... no matter their work history. You may just find a great individual who will become a valued member of your team from either the employed or unemployed ranks of those applying for a position in your workplace.

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