

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

Rosy labor report belies job seekers

Monica Brown has 15 years of marketing and sales experience, nearly half as a manager, trainer or team leader. Today, she's waiting tables.

For two months, the Alameda resident has risen at 6 a.m. each weekday and squeezed in at least three hours scanning job sites, filling out applications and tweaking her [resume](#) before rushing into work. But she has heard little beyond automated responses.

"I don't know why it is so freaking difficult to get somebody to open the door," said Brown, 34, who moved from Kansas City, Mo., a little more than a year ago.

She said this on Dec. 8, the same day the U.S. Labor Department reported the 39th straight month of job growth, an unemployment rate that ticked down a half-point from the prior year and average hourly earnings growth of 4.1 percent.

The East Bay job market is tighter still, with unemployment at 3.7 percent in October, below the threshold considered "full employment."

But the term belies the reality that Brown and many others face. Employment experts say it's largely a tale of two job markets. The most highly qualified, with impeccable credentials and a Rolodex of relationships, can easily snag jobs and demand high salaries and perks.

For those with red flags on their resume, or a shallow network, just landing a corporate [interview](#) remains a challenge. They may be employed as far as the Labor Department is concerned, but often, they're not doing jobs that reflect their experience, training or ambitions.

"When your expertise isn't perfectly suited to the positions that are available, you then move down from the 'A' category to the 'B' category," said Joel Garfinkle, an executive [coach](#) and founder of Oakland-based DreamJobCoaching.com. He said that many of the resumes posted on job sites such as CareerBuilder.com or Craigslist.org may even fall into a 'C' category.

"Is the job market improving so that the 'Cs' will get more nibbles?" he said. "Yes, but that's not happening as much as people might think."

There are two basic issues in play, experts say. First, unemployment statistics don't accurately reflect the job situation. Second, even if there are more jobs out there, they're not necessarily "good jobs" — the ones a college-educated or highly-experienced worker wants.

A report last year by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a progressive research firm, found the economy now produces 25 percent to 30 percent fewer good jobs than it did 25 years ago. The Washington, D.C., group defines this as paying about \$32,000 a year with employer-paid health insurance and a pension.

A series of macroeconomic trends during the last quarter century account for the shift, said John Schmitt, senior economist for the CEPR. Those include a stagnant minimum wage, declining unionization rates, offshoring and deregulation.

“The net effect has been to decrease workers’ bargaining power,” he said. “We produce more, we work more hours, and yet ... there’s apparently no progress in terms of wages, health insurance and pensions for the vast majority.”

Separately, the unemployment rate doesn’t paint a complete picture. While unemployment continues to tick down, the employment rate has lagged. That’s because many people simply are dropping out of the market and no longer being counted as unemployed.

In fact, about 1.4 million people were “marginally attached” to the labor force in November, meaning they had not searched for work in the four weeks before the survey, the Labor Department said. Of the total, 349,000 were classified as “discouraged workers,” those who were not looking because they believed no jobs were available.

Job statistics also don’t reflect the self-employed or contract workers who may wish to find a full-time job but can’t, or the highly-educated or skilled who have settled for lower-end jobs like Brown.

“Looking at the overall unemployment rate and even the rate of growth in average wages may not reflect the experiences of a large portion of the workforce,” said Arindrajit Dube, a UC Berkeley economist.

Workers have little control over the broad forces reshaping the marketplace, but they can improve their job hunting in several ways, Garfinkle said.

One of the most common mistakes that job seekers make, for instance, is focusing almost exclusively on Internet searches and applications. There are 1.33 jobs posted online for every 100 job seekers, according to the CEPR, creating long odds for any worker.

The vast majority of jobs are secured through networking, so a smart job seeker should focus there, Garfinkle said. Attend as many networking events as possible and ask everyone, from past colleagues to the mail carrier, for leads.

Resume shortcomings can be more difficult to solve. Those that sound the loudest alarm bells include a lack of credible or known companies, gaps or job-jumping and little or irrelevant job experience.

Micah Fisher-Kirshner, 25, is grappling with this last problem. While many of his undergraduate classmates ventured directly into the workforce, Fisher-Kirshner decided to earn an advanced degree. He graduated in June with a master's degree in Pacific International Affairs from UC San Diego.

In the past six months, he has landed promising interviews with Google Inc., Lam Research Corp. and Red Bricks Media. But no offers followed, as job offers tended to go to those with longer resumes. Fisher-Kirshner continues to live with his parents in Fremont.

"The job market has been great for those who already have job experience," he said. "But the starting entry level that would work for me, that doesn't seem to be so good."

Brown's Achilles' heel, meanwhile, is job-jumping. She had the unfortunate experience of working for two companies that laid her off amid downsizing in less than a year. She tends to get more responses when she leaves off the dates, but the question always comes up in the interview, she said.

The only offers she has received were for 100 percent commission positions, where she wouldn't earn a penny until she closes a sale and would be on her own for health insurance.

So for now Brown's a waitress. Her boss yells when she doesn't wipe a table properly and dings the \$20 she earns an hour, with tips, when she messes up an order.

"(It) is the most demeaning thing I've done," she said. "This is what my life has boiled down to."