

Holiday business thriving at job centers



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IN THIS ARTICLE

Conventional wisdom tells job seekers to put their employment search on hold from mid-December through early January, when companies aren't hiring and no one with any say is around to talk to anyway.

But because of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that sent the already slumping U.S. economy into a tailspin, December 2001 is anything but a traditional holiday season. Soaring unemployment has meant a brisk business at career centers locally and nationwide.

In Alameda and Contra Costa counties, out-of-work technology workers have flocked to hiring fairs staged by retail companies like Safeway Inc., Burlington Coat Factory and Lowe's Home Improvement Centers, which are opening new stores throughout the area. And one field that continues to thrive and hire new employees is biotechnology, which has a major presence in the East Bay.

"These days, we're focusing on biotech, but there also continues to be a need for administrative employees, as well as health care workers," said Claire Marchiano, coordinator of the EastBay Works Career Center in Concord. "This month, we had a school district looking for custodial trainees and the San Francisco Police Department seeking prospective officers."

Marchiano said she tells job seekers the holidays are a great time to network at corporate social functions, as well as call the companies where they're interested in working.

"Not everyone takes time off during the holidays," she said. "In fact, the people with hiring responsibilities may be more apt to

pick up their own phone because their offices are so lightly staffed at this time of year.

"People shouldn't lose momentum in their job search just because it's the holidays. Employers who are still around may really get into the holiday spirit and be more willing to give job or informational interviews."

Though Marchiano said central Contra Costa has not been hit as hard by technology- and airline-related job losses as San Francisco, the Peninsula and San Jose, or even the more tech-reliant Tri-Valley and Fremont areas of the East Bay.

Nevertheless, it has still been more crowded around her office at 1875 Willow Pass Road than usual the past few months.

"We have tours twice a day around our facility, and we're always busy," she said.

The Concord office is one of 14 operated by EastBay Works, a private-public partnership whose sponsors include the state Employment Development Department and the Private Industry Council.

Former tech workers and casualties of the dot-com meltdown have been packing the Tri-Valley One-Stop Career Center at 4125 Mohr Ave. in Pleasanton during November and December, according to Mark Mithaiwala, a business service representative who spends much of his time in job development activities.

Pleasanton-based Safeway, opening its second Dublin store early next year, just finished a four-day hiring fair at the One-Stop office, attracting 200 job seekers. Lowe's is seeking hundreds of employees to work at its new locations in Livermore, Union City, Hercules and Antioch

Many of those interviewing for jobs at Safeway are unemployed tech workers, Mithaiwala said.

"December can be a down time when you're looking for a job, but we've had a lot of activity here this year," he said.

He concurred with Marchiano the holidays are a great time to network.

"It's also a good time to see if you can get informational

interviews," he said. "There are no guarantees, of course, because things slow down, but it can be a very productive time if you're fortunate enough to reach the right people."

Joel Garfinkle, owner of San Leandro-based career counseling firm Dream Job Coaching, agrees job seekers should keep plugging away.

"The holidays can be an excellent time to look for work," he said. "About 70 or 80 percent of people quit looking during December and early January, so competition is much reduced. It's true more corporate people take time off, but the ones who stick around are much more able to receive people."

While most employers are reluctant to hire these days because of economic concerns, Garfinkle said some industries, especially biotech, are adding staff.

"I tell people to stay serious and take action at this time of year," Garfinkle said. "This is the time to create opportunity."

If people can't get interviews, they can still make the quieter

holiday season a productive one for their job search, Marchiano said. "They can still come in and research companies or update and send off their resumes," she said.