



Hiring may not be so great in 2008

Despite a few bright spots, workers could find it tough to land dream job

By Eve Tahmincioglu

As the New Year begins, many employees across the country are hoping 2008 will be the year they find their dream job, or at least one that pays a decent salary.

According to the recruiting firm Hudson's employment index many workers are indeed glum when it comes to their outlook for the New Year:

- Twenty-one percent of the workers polled believe their job prospects will be worse in the coming year, up from 15 percent last year.
- Thirty percent say it is not at all likely they will be looking for a new job next year, compared to 26 percent one year ago.
- Forty-six percent feel their organizations' leaders are expecting the economy to get worse next year, and only 22 percent say executives think the economy is getting better.
- Fifty-seven percent of the workers polled said they expected to earn significantly or a little bit more in 2007, down from 63 percent in 2006.

And I hate to say it, folks, there might be something to these workers' negative vibes.

Hiring practically stalled in December, driving the nation's unemployment rate up to a two-year high of 5 percent.

The jobs outlook for 2008 looks anything but rosy. Unfortunately, economists, employment reports and staffing experts are pointing to a tough jobs outlook, at least for the first half of this year.

"Most of us believe the first half of the year will be a slow growth period," says Jared Bernstein, an economist with the Economic Policy Institute. "Every forecast I've seen is for unemployment to creep above 5 percent by the middle of next year."

"It will be a less than hospitable job creation environment," he notes.

Some parts of the country, he adds, will be harder hit than others, especially those whacked by the housing bubble including Michigan, California, Florida and Arizona.

In another sign things might be tougher for job seekers, The Conference Board reported in late December that help-wanted advertising declined in all nine regions of the United States with the steepest dips in the Pacific, Mountain and West North Central regions.

"The forward indicators of the labor market activity offer little hope that the labor market will be spared," says Ken Goldstein, labor economist for The Conference Board. "It's not good news when more people are signing up for unemployment checks, and the average length of unemployment is lengthening."

There will be some industries that will suffer more than others. Anything real estate and housing related is expected to take a hit as far as jobs, and that includes everything from mortgage companies to home appliance manufacturers.

Technology is also sluggish, economist Bernstein points out, bringing in new jobs only in "drips and drabs."

But there are also bright spots, he adds. "In health care, job growth has way outpaced the average, and so are jobs in education."

Bioscience and clean technology companies are also seeing some signs of life, says Chuck Pappalardo, managing director of recruiting firm Trilogy Search.

Despite the positives, it's going to be a bumpy road for most workers this year.

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"The debate isn't whether we'll have a first half that's strong but whether we'll have a recession or just slow growth," explains Bernstein. So it's time to get your career armor on and figure out how you can best fight your way through the job battle ahead.

If you've been laid off from a job you thought paid well and you can't find something comparable like what Gary mentioned above, this next year might be a good time to go back to school in order to learn something new so you can transfer your skills to another industry. There may be state or federal money available for retraining, so it's a good idea to check with local community colleges.

With a mechanical background you could be a hot commodity in a hot industry like green manufacturing where companies are looking to make environmentally friendly products, says Trilogy's Pappalardo.

Now more than ever, you have to be clear on what you can bring to a prospective employer because there are going to be more people applying for that job you want.

"They need to develop an elevator pitch for why someone would want to hire them for a particular job," Pappalardo advises. "Candidates want to be very targeted. I don't mean get one or two targets, but really target your career and who you are. What sets you apart and makes you more qualified for a certain job than others."

To target your search, you have to do a lot of research up front into a company and the job you're applying for. Sending out hundreds of resumes without knowing exactly what you want is going to get you no where, especially in a weak job market.

For Robert, the licensed lawyer from Kansas City, and others like him the only option may be relocation.

This is especially true for people who want to work in the manufacturing sector but are in Northern states or the Midwest, says Pappalardo. Manufacturing positions will be easier to come by in Southern states including Tennessee and the Carolinas, he adds.

But often relocating is just not possible, as with Robert who says, "My wife has found her 'dream job' here in Kansas City, and we have family and friends here, so relocating to another part of the country is not an option we're ready to consider at this time."

In this case, Pappalardo says Robert should think outside the box and find a legal job in what may seem non-traditional areas, such as nonprofits or combining his legal and administrative skills in a corporate position that's not in the legal department.

No matter what path you take, get ready to brace yourself for this year.

I have covered labor issues and the world of business for about two decades, and during that time I've seen how economic downturns can hit working people hard.

The ones that make it through unscathed have a few things in common: They are willing to adapt and upgrade their skills in order to try something new; or they're open to moving to a city where they can do what they love; or they just keep grinding away at a less-than-perfect job until the good times start rolling again.

And, the bottom line, they don't give up.

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