

Even as layoffs persist, some good jobs go begging

By CHRISTOPHER LEONARD (AP) — Updated at 11:00 a.m. ET

In a brutal job market, here's a task that might sound easy: Fill jobs in nursing, engineering and energy research that pay \$55,000 to \$60,000, plus benefits.

Yet even with 15 million people hunting for work, even with the unemployment rate nearing 10 percent, some employers can't find enough qualified people for good-paying career jobs.

Ask Steve Jones, a hospital recruiter in Indianapolis who's struggling to find qualified nurses, pharmacists and MRI technicians. Or Ed Baker, who's looking to hire at a U.S. Energy Department research lab in Richland, Wash., for \$60,000 each.

Economists say the main problem is a mismatch between available work and people qualified to do it. Millions of jobs with attractive pay and benefits that once drew legions of workers to the auto industry, construction, Wall Street and other sectors are gone, probably for good. And those who lost those jobs generally lack the right experience for new positions popping up in health care, energy and engineering.

Many of these specialized jobs were hard to fill even before the recession. But during downturns, recruiters tend to become even choosier, less willing to take financial risks on untested workers.

The mismatch between job opening and job seeker is likely to persist even as the economy strengthens and begins to add jobs. It also will make it harder for the unemployment rate, now at 9.8 percent, to drop down to a healthier level.

"Workers are going to have to find not just a new company, but a new industry," said Sophia Koropecykj, managing director of Moody's Economy.com. "A fifty-year-old guy who has been screwing bolts into the side of a car panel is not going to be able to become a health care administrator overnight."

It's become especially hard to find accountants, health care workers, software sales representatives, actuaries, data analysts, physical therapists and electrical engineers, labor analysts say. And employers that demand highly specialized training — like biotech firms that need plant scientists or energy companies that need geotechnical engineers to build offshore platforms — struggle even more to fill jobs.

The trend has been intensified by the speed of the job market decline, Koropecykj said. The nation has lost a net 7.6 million jobs since the recession began in December 2007. Yet it can take a year or more for a laid-off worker to gain the training and education to switch industries. That means health care jobs are going unfilled even as laid-off workers in the auto, construction or financial services industries seek work.

"So we have this army of the unemployed" without the necessary skills, Koropecykj said.

Sitting in his office overlooking the Clarian Health complex, Jones leafed through some of the applications he's received. One came from a hotel worker who listed his experience as, "Cleaning rooms; make beds, clean tubes, vacuum." Another was from a fitness instructor whose past duties included signing up gym members.

Many of the jobless seem to be applying for any opening they see, Jones said.

"You just don't have the supply to fill those particular positions," he said of the more than 200 "critical" jobs he needs to fill at Clarian, including nurses, pharmacists, MRI technicians and ultrasound technologists.

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In this photo made Monday, Sept. 28, 2009, Anthony Washington gives instructions to new employees during orientation at Clarian Health's Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)



