



Even as Layoffs Persist, Some Good Jobs Hard to Fill

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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.

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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 Koropecyj, 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, Koropecyj 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, Koropecyj 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.

Contributing to the problem is that in a tough economy, employers take longer to assess applicants and make a hiring decision. By contrast, "in a healthier economy, you don't wait around for the perfect person," said Lawrence Katz, a professor of labor economics at Harvard.

To be sure, employers in most sectors of the economy are having no trouble filling jobs — especially those, like receptionists, hotel managers or retail clerks, that don't require specialized skills.

But as more jobs vanish for good, the gap between the unemployed and the requirements of today's job openings

is widening. Throughout the economy, an average of six people now compete for each job opening — the highest ratio on government records dating to 2000.

Sifting through applications for jobs at the U.S. Energy Department's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Washington state, Baker said he sees "people that have worked in other areas, and now they're trying to apply that skill set to the energy arena."

"Unfortunately, that's not the skill set we need."

The jobs opened up after the lab received federal stimulus money to research energy-efficient buildings. Baker needs employees with backgrounds in city management and a grasp of the building codes needed to design energy-efficient buildings. Yet even a salary of \$140,000 for senior researchers isn't drawing enough qualified applicants.

Baker said he's getting resumes from well-educated people, including some from information technology workers who want to enter the green-energy field. But he said it could take a year to get an unqualified employee up to speed on all the building codes they need to know.

"We're running out of people to train" new employees, he said. "We simply cannot attract enough (qualified) people."

The lab has hired a recruiter for the first time to fill dozens of positions. Rob Dromgoole, the recruiter, is going so far as to make cold calls to college professors. He's also visiting academic conferences to pitch jobs.

The trend has left jobseekers like Joe Sladek anxious and frustrated. Sladek's 23 years in the auto industry haven't helped his efforts to land a job in alternative energy since he was laid off a year ago.

As a quality control engineer for auto supplier Dura Automotive Systems Inc. in Mancelona, Mich., he made about \$75,000. Sladek would review technical reports to make sure the factory's auto parts matched the specifications of clients like General Motors and Toyota.

He hoped to parlay that experience into a similar job at a factory making windmill blades or solar panels. Several factories were hiring, and Sladek landed a few interviews. But he never heard back.

At PricewaterhouseCoopers in Chicago, there's a shortage of qualified applicants for management jobs in tax services, auditing and consulting. Rod Adams, the company's recruiting leader, said huge pay packages on Wall Street siphoned off lots of business school graduates earlier this decade.

"That made our pipeline more scarce," he said.

Some of the openings at PricewaterhouseCoopers pay around \$100,000 and don't even require graduate degrees — just specialized accounting certifications or other credentials.

Formerly successful bankers or hedge fund managers don't necessarily qualify.

"We've gotten a lot more resumes, but they haven't been the right people," Adams said.

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