

Local Job Market Rebounds

'Real Jobs' at Profitable Firms Buoy Confidence

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The Washington job market is expected to be robust enough in 2007 that companies say they're beginning to reminisce about the late 1990s -- a boom time that now seems so distant as to have taken on the aura of an urban job-market myth.

The region is full of growing technology, sales and legal industries and has a low unemployment rate -- just 3 percent, down from 3.1 percent at the same time last year -- making it a job-seeker's market. Last year, the region added 66,200 jobs compared with 64,700 in 2005, momentum that is expected to continue despite concerns about a slowdown in the housing market.

Those figures echoed the national experience, according to numbers released Friday. The Labor Department reported that America's employers added a more-than-expected 167,000 people to payrolls in December, while the unemployment rate held steady at 4.5 percent.

In general, growth is expected to continue with consumers purchasing more, companies back in buying mode and technology firms humming with work.

"The only reason it's truly better now is that the jobs are real," said Paul Vilella, president and chief executive of Reston-based recruiting firm HireStrategy.

HireStrategy recently surveyed clients, asking how much job growth they expect this year. On average, accounting firms predict a 6 to 8 percent increase in new hires in 2007; technology firms expect 8 to 10 percent growth; and sales forces are expected to expand by 12 to 15 percent because "people are buying again," Vilella said. The least growth, 2 to 4 percent, will be in the administrative-operations and human-resources area, according to his clients.

Mary W. Legg, president and general counsel of Firm Advice, a Washington-based company that places attorneys in jobs as corporate counsel, also finds herself reminded of the late 1990s.

"But the difference that I see now is that companies that are hiring are profitable companies," she said. "They are hiring because they have existing needs."

She hired someone in November whose sole job is to cold-call attorneys to see if they are interested in changing jobs. She expects a 20 percent increase in placements this year over last and is "advertising in every avenue I can find" because demand for attorneys is so high.

Here's a sample of local businesses, and what they're expecting:

Booz Allen Hamilton

The McLean consulting firm will continue to drown in resumes in 2007, says Elizabeth Miller, Booz Allen recruiting director. The company is hiring 15 percent more people worldwide than it did last year at this point in its fiscal year.

Typically, the company does 1,000 interviews from the 15,000 applications it receives per month. It hires about 4,000 people a year and, as of the end of 2006, had a workforce of 18,595. It has about 1,200 job postings per month.

"We are continuing to need qualified candidates," Miller said. "What's challenging is the job market is so tight and unemployment is really low. Everyone's competing for the same talent."

The company recently created a group dedicated to identifying potential candidates, including those who are not actively looking for work. It is also focused on rehiring those who left, expecting that to account for about 5 percent of its new hires.

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Minnieland

Minnieland, a Virginia chain of day-care centers, expects a busy year on top of a busy year, predicting increased enrollments in 2007 of 2 to 3 percent, requiring about 100 more staff.

In the first three days of this year, Web inquiries to sign children up at the 80 centers jumped 75 percent, said company spokeswoman Gina Dabney.

In addition, Virginia licensing regulations tightened ratios of the number of workers per child in 2006, meaning still more hires.

That means one other thing: The company plans to increase fees. "It still looks really good for the child-care industry," Dabney said.

Williams Industries

Marianne V. Pastor, vice president of [Williams Industries](#), has her concerns about 2007.

As a construction company that specializes in steel fabrication, Williams is hoping the Virginia General Assembly will approve more money for transportation projects, many of which require steel. The company's two main projects, the Springfield Interchange and Woodrow Wilson Bridge, are winding down.

And finding qualified trade workers in the region has been increasingly difficult. The company has taken to bringing people in from out of the area, many from West Virginia. "You find a lot of young people who want to be computer programmers, politicians or whatever," Pastor said. "But they don't have the old-school trade skills. And it's very difficult for us when we do have a surge in need to have a surge in employment."

The Manassas-based company will be touting its training and apprentice program this year to try to attract new workers.

"We are trying to keep and protect our core employees from wandering off to other regions that seem to have gotten their act together," she said, upset that Virginia has not yet made decisions about such major projects as the Dulles rail extension.

Arnold Worldwide

The McLean-based advertising firm has a cautious outlook. The advertising industry in recent years has been in flux, with firms consolidating or closing. Eisner Communications, based in Baltimore, closed its doors in November after 67 years.

"Business has just changed a great deal," said Karen Riordan, managing partner and executive director at Arnold, said. "There are not as many agencies in the market as there used to be. It's survival of the fittest."

Arnold will still hire in 2007, but attempt to find people who can take on a variety of tasks. Instead of hiring account managers, it will look for people who know how to manage ad projects, design, brochure work and public relations. Riordan called them "360 people."

The firm will continue to move people from its offices in New York and Boston as needed, and it will expand its efforts to recruit minority college students at universities such as Howard.

"We're still out recruiting," she said. "The labor market will be tight, but the overall picture is rosy. It is just challenging to keep trying to pluck the best and brightest from the pool."

Latham and Watkins

Latham and Watkins expects another busy year for lawyers in the Washington area. With about 50 summer associates, it will be the largest summer class ever, according to Rick Bernthal, the D.C. office's managing partner. The firm will also be "targeting" 40 new hires in the fall. "We're very bullish on the year," he said.

More companies are merging, more people are buying businesses, clients are making huge investments again and the private-equity field is "reaching in an unprecedented way" to acquire businesses, he said -- and all those deals require lawyers. "Every sector in our practice, for the first time in many years, there's not one area that's soft," Bernthal said. "Companies are making bets on the future positively."

Verizon Wireless

Verizon, with regional headquarters in Laurel, hired about 1,000 new employees last year, which brought the regional workforce to about 4,000. Growth this year, said spokeswoman Sherri Cunningham, will primarily involve customer service and retail positions. Last year, many employees were hired for retail operations and a call center in Hanover, Md., and they will get attention this year.

"We're still hiring in 2007. However, the main focus is going to be continued employee development," she said.

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