

Left behind: Millions of Americans still can't find work

Miller, Karla L . The Washington Post (Online) , Washington, D.C.: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post. Oct 28, 2021 .

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FULL TEXT

For all the stories of people quitting jobs and finding better ones during "The Great Resignation," many more workers are struggling to bounce back from layoffs or escape miserable workplaces.

Yet millions of jobs are going unfilled.

You may have seen stories about a Florida man named Joey Holz who claims to have submitted 60 job applications for entry-level positions with supposedly desperate employers, but says he received only one interview —and was offered lower pay and hours than what had been advertised.

That experiment aligns with the experiences of many of my readers.

Carol, a Dallas corporate communications manager, kept detailed records after she was laid off at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. (Carol is identified by first name only to avoid discouraging potential employers.) Out of 240 résumés sent and networking contacts made, 17 resulted in interviews, according to Carol's count. One employer, after five interviews, said an offer letter was forthcoming. After two weeks with no offer, Carol said, she learned the employer had decided not to fill the position.

Conventional advice might include hiring a career coach for expert advice, reworking the résumé to focus on key words, sprucing up online profiles, and beefing up interviewing skills. Carol has done all of that. She's experienced in her field and also is applying outside her field and below her skill level. She's been told she's overqualified and underqualified. In one rejection, she said she was told that the employer wanted someone "more modern."

"My soul is tired," Carol said via email. "I certainly cannot stomach [hearing] one more insipid politician say that there are jobs for people who want one and insinuate that anyone who isn't working is lazy and a freeloader." The stimulus income and severance from her layoff have run out, and she's living on her savings.

Carol is just one among many who don't fit the "no one wants to work" narrative. For every alternative someone might propose —What about fast-food jobs? Administrative support? Customer service? —I've heard from someone who has applied for those kinds of jobs multiple times without luck. Somehow the jobs that need workers are not connecting with the workers who need jobs.

One reason may be employers' reliance on applicant-sorting technology and opaque application processes that, like a black hole, draw in résumés but offer no responses. Even tech-savvy-seekers seem to fall through the cracks. Robert Taraschi of Washington, who ran his own strategic consulting firm for years, said in an email that he tried to track down one vanished job application through a high-ranking personal contact at the organization he had applied to through a jobs site. His friend's HR department said they never received Taraschi's application. Taraschi applied again —and again was told they never received it. Assuming HR was telling the truth, it seems the technology —whether by accident or design —had failed to connect candidate and employer.

Another likely factor is age discrimination. Many of the frustrated seekers I have heard from are mid-career, age 50 or older. Employers who deduce their age from education credentials and work history may be making assumptions about how long they'll stick with the job and how adaptable they are.

"I want to work for another five years, but apparently everyone reviewing my applications is afraid I'm planning to

retire in six months," said Eugene Chandler, a municipal public employee from Arlington, Tex. "As I added credentials ... my interviews went down, not up. Now my applications garner zero interest at all," he said in an email.

With a master's degree and 20 years' experience, Laura is a Chicago educator who said she's landing interviews, but always seems to lose out to younger and presumably lower-paid candidates. (She is identified only by her first name to avoid jeopardizing her job search.)

Age discrimination is notoriously hard to prove. Qualified, experienced workers may be passed over for other reasons, such as wanting higher pay than the job offers. But most of the over-50 job-seekers who contacted me were turned down before they even got to the salary discussion stage.

And some job-seekers are encountering a bait-and-switch on compensation when they do land that interview. Brian Branco of Portland, Ore., secured an interview for a sales job at a large company for which the advertised salary was \$50,000, with additional compensation based on performance. The night before the interview, Branco said, he received an email from the employer informing him the compensation was "in the \$45,000-plus range depending on experience."

He reiterated that he was interested in the originally advertised salary. Branco interviewed, but determined that the job wasn't worth it at the lower starting salary. "Pretty crazy they won't go up [\$5,000] even being that desperate," he told me by email.

Marie from Minnesota, who has applied for customer service, merchandising, and stocking jobs, reported similar experiences: "I had great interviews, and then came the offer: 'Well, the \$16 per hour is only overnight / only after 90 days / only after your six-month review,'" she said in an email. (Marie asked not to use her full name because it might jeopardize her hiring prospects.)

One employer offered Marie an assembly position in July at \$12 an hour. She declined because the job had been advertised at \$15 an hour. Several months later, the employer called her back and offered to sweeten the deal ... to \$13 an hour.

These dollar amounts might not seem to justify turning down a desperately needed job. But by that logic, they shouldn't be enough to justify losing out on desperately needed workers either. And even desperate job-seekers who are burned out and disillusioned by bad deals at their earlier jobs are justifiably disinclined to make new deals that promise more of the same.

DETAILS

Subject:	Compensation; Customer services; Employers; Interviews; Age discrimination; Employment; Wages &salaries
Business indexing term:	Subject: Compensation Customer services Employers Employment Wages &salaries
Publication title:	The Washington Post (Online); Washington, D.C.
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Oct 28, 2021
Section:	Business
Publisher:	WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post
Place of publication:	Washington, D.C.

Country of publication:	United States, Washington, D.C.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	26419599
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2587509893
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/left-behind-millions-americans-still-can-t-find/docview/2587509893/se-2?accountid=44910
Copyright:	Copyright WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post Oct 28, 2021
Last updated:	2021-10-29
Database:	U.S. Major Dailies

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