

Hiring falters over shifting priorities

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FULL TEXT

gap in what Applicants, employers want

Openings, rejections abundant in a difficult recovery

Even as the United States has a near-record number of job openings and companies complain they can't find enough workers, some job seekers remain frustrated that they have not been able to get work despite filling out dozens of applications daily on popular sites such as ZipRecruiter, Indeed, LinkedIn and Craigslist.

American workers are increasingly seeking higher pay, more flexibility and remote options as they flex their leverage in the current job market, but many companies are not necessarily being more accommodative, continuing to favor candidates with several years of experience in their industry, more availability to work evening or weekend hours, or a preference for those willing to work in person.

This mismatch in what both sides prioritize is yet another challenge complicating the country's economic recovery, helping explain weaker hiring in August and September. In many ways, supply-and-demand forces in the labor market are still out of equilibrium.

While employers have complained for months about the difficulty they face hiring during a labor shortage, with more than 10 million job openings for 7.4 million unemployed workers, interviews with job-hunting workers revealed a concurrent reality - difficulty finding suitable work, as they navigate the pandemic labor market.

The deep frustration among both hiring managers and job seekers underscores the challenges in getting so many people back to work quickly and the growing divide between what employers want vs. what job seekers want.

"A lot of the interest from employers is not spread evenly across the labor pool. There are some people in very high demand and there are some people who get no interest at all," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at ZipRecruiter.

"Employers really do value prior experience a lot."

Laviana Hampton spent years mixing drinks as a bartender at a popular nightclub in downtown San Antonio, but the pandemic has made her rethink her job. Hampton has seen coronavirus infections hobble and kill some of her friends, making her far less willing to take any risks. A friend's 70-year-old mother, who was like a second mom to Hampton, died last month of covid-19 after spending three months in the hospital. Another bartender whom Hampton knows contracted covid after returning to work and ended up in the hospital on a ventilator. Few in Texas wear masks in bars and restaurants.

For months Hampton, 40, has been scouring job sites for work-from-home positions in customer service and other fields so she won't have to return to bartending in a packed club.

"I have every right to work in a safe working environment," she said. "I want to work from home, I want to keep safe."

There's a growing preference for remote work among job seekers. Some 55 percent of people on ZipRecruiter reported looking for a job that would allow them to work from home. The vast majority said either workplace safety concerns or child- or family-care needs were driving their preference for remote work.

Hampton has not been able to land anything and is getting desperate since her unemployment benefits ended over the summer. With no recent experience in many of the jobs she is applying for, companies are reluctant to give her a chance.

"I send out so many applications a day and nobody gets back to me. In the past eight months, I've only had three telephone interviews," she said. "It's affected my mental health greatly. I cry all the time. I've never been on unemployment before."

Hampton is among 2.3 million Americans - about a third of the unemployed who have been out of work more than six months. The Labor Department refers to them as "long-term unemployed." The nation has only had this many long-term unemployed twice before - during the Great Recession and during the early 1980s downturn.

Black and less-educated Americans are disproportionately likely to be long-term unemployed, but during the pandemic an unusually high number of White women with college degrees, some of whom stopped working to care for children, have been in that category. Older Americans and those with an arrest or felony record face additional struggles to get hired, research and interviews show.

Complicating the job search for the long-term unemployed is the explosion of companies using robots to sort through applicants, at least in the first round. This highly automated process excludes anyone who is not a near-perfect fit on paper for a job. Nearly half of employers say they quickly reject candidates who haven't worked in more than six months, according to a recent Harvard Business School study.

Jerry Vimont, 62, thinks his age is working against him. He wants a retail job in San Antonio and has over two decades of experience working for many of America's biggest retailers as a cashier and manager, but he has not been able to get a job. He has been applying actively on websites such as Indeed and the Texas Workforce Commission since June, after he was vaccinated.

A big problem for Vimont is that he stopped working before the pandemic, in 2019, because of a wrist injury. He is cleared to work again, but the vast majority of retail jobs require an online application and he is finding it hard to get past the algorithms that scan applicants, since he now has a large gap on his résumé. He has had only three interviews since June and no job offers. In one interview, a store manager bluntly said that he only wanted to hire someone who would be around a long time, implying Vimont might not because of his age.

"With their algorithms, the hiring system is simply weeding out a lot of applications so companies don't even see them," Vimont said. "These are applications for jobs that I'm very well qualified for."

He was recently rejected from an \$11-an-hour assistant retail manager job that he said would have been ideal.

"People are applying to job postings thinking a human being is going to look at their submission, but they rarely get through if they have a gap in their job history or don't have the exact right key words," said Joseph Fuller, a management professor at Harvard Business School and lead author of a recent study that found more than 90 percent of major employers use automated screening of job applications.

Despite having a college degree and decades of experience in executive roles in sales, marketing and strategy, Avital Shimshowitz gets rejected within hours for anything she applies for online. She used her network to get some interviews, but many tell her she's overqualified for the roles they have open.

"Even if I'm willing to take a pay cut, I can't get back into the workforce," said Shimshowitz, who lives in Manhattan.

"I was successful. I'm 52, and I'm thinking: Am I over the hill?"

After losing a sales and marketing job during the pandemic, she has been working on her own pet care start-up, but she doesn't have the funding to expand it. She recently completed a Stanford University certificate program to expand her skills.

Shimshowitz has plenty of company in New York. The state has seen a disproportionate increase in long-term unemployment since the pandemic began. New York had the third highest long-term unemployment rate in the nation in the 12 months ended in September, and was exceeded only by the tourist hubs of Hawaii and Nevada. Many economists hoped that the pandemic had created such an unusual situation that employers would waive their normal requirements and change their screening techniques, especially since they are now trying to hire so many workers. But so far, little of that has occurred. The main response from employers has been to raise starting pay in an effort to lure the best talent.

Staffing firm Adecco said last week that temporary jobs that pay less than \$18 an hour attracted few applicants, and that more than 40 percent of workers are seeking more flexibility or a job change. Still, the firm noted that

many employers assume workers will lose leverage soon.

"Looking forward, talent scarcity for temporary roles will lessen as savings from support schemes are depleted," Coram Williams, Adecco Group's chief financial officer, said on the company's earnings call this month.

Bartender Samuel Wiles, 34, isn't having any trouble getting job interviews. With his seven years of experience making cocktails and managing bars in Los Angeles, he has received a lot of calls. But he has noticed the interviews are very different from what they were pre-pandemic.

Before the pandemic, a bar manager tended to do the hiring. Now he's noticed bar owners are often doing the interviews. At one interview, he tried to dazzle the owner by making a signature cocktail only to be told that the restaurant now makes most cocktails in batches to save time since it is so short-staffed. He did not get the job and was stunned to see that his experience seemed to work against him.

But the biggest surprise for Wiles is how many bars now demand "open availability," meaning they want people who can work any night of the week. He can't recall ever seeing that before the pandemic, especially in Los Angeles, where so many restaurant workers are also trying to break into the film industry and need time off for auditions and gigs. Wiles has had five interviews and told each one he's willing to work any day but Sunday or Wednesday. He is even offering to work more nights now than he did pre-pandemic, but none of his interviews have led to job offers.

"The preeminent vibe I'm getting is the people hiring are desperate, but they are unwilling to adjust their expectations at all," Wiles said.

Bars and restaurants were hit especially hard during the pandemic as states and cities shut down and restricted indoor dining. Staffing is still low in many restaurants, and workers are quitting at record rates, leading many restaurants to want new hires to be available to work any day to be able to fill holes, in case employees quit or don't show up.

"Three waiters quit last week at the steakhouse where I work, because they are tired," said Dean Lopez, a longtime server at high-end restaurants in Memphis. Lopez said the staff is already thin and the remaining waiters had to pick up even more tables and shifts.

At the same time, many business owners say they have been stumped by their inability to fill open positions with so many people out of work.

Andrew Wilson is the owner of Angel Water, which sells home water-purification devices out of offices in Illinois and Florida. He has had a hard time finding workers for more than 20 open positions since the spring. The positions pay \$15 an hour, plus commissions, for sales jobs selling filters at kiosks in places such as Costco, and include benefits such as health care for full-time workers.

But applications are few and far between. Even some of those who do apply and are offered jobs do not show up to interviews or the first day of work.

Wilson was trying to figure out this summer what was wrong. His sales positions, typically staffed by people in their 20s after college, require in-person work, but they had never been hard to fill. But he says he's come to believe that unemployment benefits and people's savings were making them less motivated to take jobs.

"I'm literally selling the job and selling myself to these people," Wilson said. "Normally my question was, 'Tell me why you think you're a good fit for our organization.' Now the tables have turned. I'm like, 'Let me explain to you why I'm a good fit for you.'"

Wilson said he has seen some improvement recently and has been able to hire eight people.

Many job seekers say they are looking for new lines of work, because they want more flexibility or a different career path - potentially exacerbating mismatches between jobs posted and the experience levels of job seekers in the market. At the same time, industries that have faced the biggest hiring struggles and most resignations are increasingly looking for employees who have some experience, because they are a safer bet.

"With all these jobs and all this competition, why are employers being so picky? Part of that is it just takes a long time for people to change the way they think," said Chris Hyams, chief executive of job site Indeed.

Another problem is the unemployed are not always located where the job openings are.

Isaiah Washington, 25, has been looking for work for most of the past year, after losing his job as an archivist at the Smithsonian Institution. He moved back to Louisville, where he is from, but has been unable to land a job despite applying for 10 to 15 positions a day in digital marketing, sales and office administration, as well as at other museums. He's looking for a job that would pay \$15 to \$20 an hour and offer health insurance.

The lengthy job search is taking a toll on his self-esteem. He's stopped checking boxes to specify his race - he's Black - fearing that could be holding him back. In advance of an interview a few weeks ago, he cut his hair short, which had been long enough to wear in a pony tail, wondering if that, too, could play a role. He didn't get the job. "I've always felt that I'm smart, I'm personable," Washington said. "But I feel so stupid doing this stuff. It's kind of hurt my self-worth a bit."

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