APRIL 2021

JOBS JOBS JOBS

The Latest Opportunities and Insights

Ads for local employment opportunities
Pages 2-4

IT employment continues to climb
Page 1

Rising job market faces obstacles
Page 2

Facebook delivers gender biased job ads
Page 3

Can Biden add energy jobs?
Page 4

IT employment continues its unabated climb

ALEXANDRIA, Va. -- In March, IT employment increased by 0.39% to 5,318,800 jobs, according to TechServe Alliance, the national trade association of the IT & Engineering Staffing and Solutions Industry. On a year-over-year basis, IT employment has declined by 0.41% since March 2020 shedding 21,900 IT workers.

Engineering employment grew by 0.29% sequentially to 2,592,100. On a year-over-year basis, engineering employment decreased by 2.26% since March 2020, a loss of 60,000 engineering workers.

"After eight months of uninterrupted growth, IT employment will be back to pre-COVID levels within the next 30 to 60 days," observed Mark Roberts, CEO of TechServe Alliance. "The primary challenge we experienced before the onset of COVID confronts us again—an insufficient supply of talent in many IT skill sets. Further supporting the data, our firms report many candidates with multiple job offers—underscoring a systemic long-term challenge with no ready solution," added Roberts.

For the complete April 2021 TechServe Alliance Employment Indices please visit: https://www.techservealliance.org/news/it-employment-continues-its-unabated-climb/

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An Advertising Supplement To

THE ROBESONIAN Bladen Journal

Rising job market facing obstacles

By Christopher Rugaber
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — A surge in hiring in the United States last month — 916,000 added jobs, the most since August — coincides with growing confidence that a blistering pace of job growth will continue as vaccinations increase and federal aid fuels economic growth.

The most optimistic economists even predict that between now and year's end, the nation could produce as many as 10 million more jobs and restore the labor market to its pre-pandemic level.

Maybe so. Yet even in normal times, it would be hard to regain all those jobs so quickly. And these aren't normal times.

Many people who've been thrown out of the labor force remain fearful of the coronavirus and reluctant to take face-to-face service jobs. Millions of women are still caring for children attending school online — and can't take jobs because they can't find or afford child care.

Extended unemployment aid has meant that some employers might have to pay more to attract workers, which they may feel unable to do. And some people will need new skills before they can land a job to replace the one they lost.

While few doubt that the trillions in federal money flowing through the economy will help accelerate hiring, the challenges are sure to endure. Here's a look at some of them:

HEALTH FEARS

For now, a sizable majority of Americans remain unvaccinated. And after weeks of sharp declines, the number of daily infections is creeping back up. Recruiters say that trend is discouraging some of the unemployed from taking jobs.

"People are afraid to come to work — there is some of that," said Tammy Browning, president of KellyOCG, a staffing agency.

Eventually, ongoing vaccinations ought to gradually reduce such fears, although a portion of Americans remain hesitant to get vaccinated. Browning also suggested that employers will need to become more creative about making workers feel comfortable on the job. Many of her firm's clients are manufacturing companies. On many hot factory floors, their employees have to wear masks and gloves for eight or more hours a day.

Companies should consider providing more break times, Browning said, and allow workers to remove their masks outside or in socially distant break rooms.

As a single mother, Jennifer Knapp of Augusta, Maine, worries about what a return to work would mean for her and her children's health. A year ago, Knapp, 44, lost her job as a receptionist at a hotel and spa, a place she described as a "hub of germs."

"There is work out there, if you want to put yourself at risk," she said.

But the open jobs she sees are typically temporary and offer low pay. Right now, Knapp is living off savings, child support payments from her ex-husband and unemployment aid. Like many parents, she'd like to find a work-from-home job, ideally in her field of psychology and social work.

"The goal," she said, "is to get back out there and work, as long as my kids are doing OK."

NEED FOR CHILD CARE

Nearly 2.5 million women lost jobs and stopped looking for work during the pandemic. In most cases, experts say, it was because so many children were suddenly stuck at home, going to school online, and their parents lacked available or affordable child care. Better child care options or more flexible work schedules would be needed to fully reverse that trend.

Some such change is becoming evident as schools and child care centers reopen. About 500,000 women returned to the labor force in March and found jobs. The improvement could continue in the coming months: Jed Kolko, chief economist at Indeed, the job listings website, says job openings at child care centers are growing, a sign that more of these centers are back in business.

Recruiters also say flexible or hybrid work schedules, along with benefits for part-time workers, may be critical in attracting job seekers, especially women. More companies could provide on-site child care.

"I think it is going to require some systemic changes by employers," said Karen Fichuk, chief executive of Randstad North America, a recruiting firm.

EXTENDED JOBLESS AID

Recruiters say the $300-a-week federal unemployment benefit that was provided by President Joe Biden's $1.9 trillion COVID aid package, on top of regular state jobless benefits that average about $340 a week, might have made it harder for some employers to find workers. For some job seekers, especially those fearful of the virus, part-time or temporary jobs at restaurants or stores that may pay less than their unemployment aid, aren't much of an alternative.

Economic research suggests that unemployment benefits generally don't deter workers from taking jobs: A study by the JPMorgan Chase Institute found that last year's federal unemployment payment didn't discourage recipients from working. But the new $300-a-week federal supplement is set to last six months — longer than the previous payment did.

"It's a much more attractive benefit now," said Julia Pollak, an economist at ZipRecruiter. "It would be foolish to think that wouldn't have any effect."

Economists have calculated that roughly half the unemployed are earning more from benefits than they did at their former jobs.

Another factor is that jobless benefits normally require the unemployed to document their efforts to seek a job in order to remain eligible. But during the pandemic, most states have suspended this requirement. That means there is less incentive to job hunt.

Browning said her firm is advising clients to pay more and offer other benefits, including bonuses, to offset the extended jobless aid. Six months ago, a client raised the hourly rate for a temporary position by $4 an hour. The proportion of jobs filled, she said, jumped from 35% to 98%.

"You really have to encourage people to come back to work," Browning said, "and that means pay at the level the market is demanding."

NEED FOR NEW SKILLS

For some of the unemployed, their old job appears gone for good. In some cases, their former employers have learned to operate with fewer workers. Landing a job will require finding work in a new occupation or industry — perhaps only after obtaining job training. This takes time.

Many economists expect more companies to help reskill workers themselves, particularly if they become desperate to hire. Should the unemployment rate keep declining, businesses might have little choice.

"When the economy is running hot, businesses begin to increase training and take risks on someone they might not have hired in the past," said Ryan Sweet, an economist at Moody's Analytics.

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Study: Facebook delivers gender biased job ads

By Matt O'brien
and Barbara Ortutay
AP Technology Writers

Facebook is showing different job ads to women and men in a way that might run afoul of anti-discrimination laws, according to a new study.

University of Southern California researchers who examined the ad-delivery algorithms of Facebook and LinkedIn found that Facebook's were skewed by gender beyond what can be legally justified by differences in job qualifications.

Men were more likely to see Domino's pizza delivery driver job ads on Facebook, while women were more likely to see Instacart shopper ads.

The trend also held in higher-paying engineering jobs at tech firms like Netflix and chipmaker Nvidia. A higher fraction of women saw the Netflix ads than the Nvidia ads, which parallels the gender breakdown in each company's workforce.

No evidence was found of similar bias in the job ads delivered by LinkedIn.

Study author Aleksandra Korolova, an assistant professor of computer science at USC, said it might be that LinkedIn is doing a better job at deliberately tamping down bias, or it might be that Facebook is simply better at picking up real-world cues from its users about gender imbalances and perpetuating them.

"It's not that the user is saying, 'Oh, I'm interested in this.' Facebook has decided on behalf of the user whether they are likely to engage," she said. "And just because historically a certain group wasn't interested in engaging in something, doesn't mean they shouldn't have an opportunity to pursue it, especially in the job category."

Facebook said in a statement Friday it has been taking meaningful steps to address issues of discrimination in ads.

"Our system takes into account many signals to try and serve people ads they will be most interested in, but we understand the concerns raised in the report," it said.

Facebook promised to overhaul its ad targeting system in 2019 as part of a legal settlement.

The social network said then it would no longer allow housing, employment or credit ads that target people by age, gender or zip code. It also limited other targeting options so these ads don't exclude people on the basis of race, ethnicity and other legally protected categories in the U.S., including national origin and sexual orientation.

Endlessly customizable ad targeting is Facebook's bread and butter, so any limits placed on its process could hurt the company's revenue. The ads users see can be tailored down to the most granular details — not just where people live and what websites they visited recently, but whether they've gotten engaged in the past six months or share characteristics with people who have recently bought new sneakers, even if they have never expressed interest in doing so themselves.

But even if advertisers can't do the targeting themselves, the study shows what critics have stressed for years -- that Facebook's own algorithms can discriminate, even if there is no intent from the job advertisers themselves.

"We haven't seen any public evidence that they are working on the issues related to their algorithms creating discrimination," Korolova said.

Since it isn't possible to show every user every advertisement that is targeted at them, Facebook's software picks what it deems relevant. If more women show interest in certain jobs, the software learns it should show women more of these sorts of ads.

LinkedIn said the study's findings align with its internal review of job ads targeting.

"However, we recognize that systemic change takes time, and we are at the beginning of a very long journey," the company said in a statement.

U.S. laws allow for ads to be targeted based on qualifications but not on protected categories such as race, gender and age. But anti-discrimination laws are largely complaint-driven, and no one can complain about being deprived of a job opportunity if they didn't know it happened to them, said Sandra Wachter, a professor at Oxford University focused on technology law.

"The tools we have developed to prevent discrimination had a human perpetrator in mind," said Wachter, who was not involved in the USC study. "An algorithm is discriminating very differently, grouping people differently and doing it in a very subtle way. Algorithms discriminate behind your back, basically."

While Domino's and Instacart have similar job requirements for their drivers, Domino's delivery workforce is predominantly male, while Instacart's is more than half female. The study, which looked at driver ads run in North Carolina compared to demographic data from voter records, found that Facebook's algorithms appeared to be learning from those gender disparities and perpetuating them.

The same trend also occurred with sales jobs at retailer Reeds Jewelers, which more women saw, and the Leith Automotive dealership, which more men saw.

The researchers call for more rigorous auditing of such algorithms and to look at other factors such as racial bias. Korolova said external audits such as the USC study can only do so much without getting access to Facebook's proprietary algorithms, but regulators could require some form of independent review to check for discrimination.

"We've seen that platforms are not so good at self-policing their algorithms for undesired societal consequences, especially when their business is at stake," she said.

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Can Biden add energy jobs?

By Cathy Bussewitz
AP Business Writer

NEW YORK — Good-paying jobs — many of them.

That's the seductive idea around which President Joe Biden is proposing a vast transformation of the energy sector, with the promise of making it far more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly. As Biden portrays it, his plan to invest in infrastructure — and accelerate a shift to renewable energy and electric vehicles, to more efficient homes and upgrades to the power grid — would produce jobs at least as good as the ones that might be lost in the process.

His plans call for 100% renewable energy in the power sector by 2035. To people who have devoted careers to the fossil fuel industries, those plans may look more like a dire threat. To the president, though, out-of-work oil workers could be shifted to other jobs — plugging uncapped oil wells, for example — and thousands more positions would be created to help string power lines and build electric vehicles and their components.

"We think that's a lot of jobs to fill, and one of the key questions is: How do we build the right skill base that can help fill those jobs?" said Matt Sigelman, CEO of Burning Glass Technologies, a labor market analytics firm.

The outlook for the energy industry's coming decades, as Biden's plan would have it, includes good wages and good benefits, reinforced by a revival of labor unions.

"I'm a union guy," he said at a union training center in Pittsburgh. "I support unions, unions built the middle class, and it's about time they started to get a piece of the action."

A speedier transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy would hardly be as simple as longtime wildcatters transforming themselves into solar installers. So many unknowns overhang the shift toward greener energy that no one knows how the industries and its jobs will evolve in the coming years.

For one thing, many experts say the transition to electric vehicles will likely mean fewer factory workers than are now employed in producing internal combustion engines and complex transmissions. EVs have 30% to 40% fewer moving parts than vehicles that run on petroleum.

Yet economists have warned that climate change poses such a grave threat that the United States must accelerate its transition to renewable energy to ensure its economic security.

COULD GREEN-ENERGY JOBS REALLY REPLACE LOST FOSSIL-FUEL JOBS?

Even with favorable policies, it can take generations to create jobs in individual industries. During his presidency, for example, Barack Obama encouraged tax incentives for the development of solar and wind energy. That effort did achieve some progress. Yet solar and wind remain to this day small sectors of the overall energy industry.

"If you're thinking about incentives and disincentives, it's easy to kill something; it's hard to create something," said Rob Sentz, chief innovation officer at Emsi, a data analytics firm.

The renewable energy industry employed about 410,000 people in 2019, including those in the solar, wind, geothermal, hydroelectric, biomass and biofuels industries, according to Burning Glass. By comparison, employment for oil and gas alone in 2020 was 516,000 counting extraction, pipelines, refining and other elements of the industry. An additional 485,000 people were working at gas stations, though gas station jobs are technically classified as retail, according to Burning Glass.

"It's a pipe dream to imagine that we're going to achieve full decarbonization in a short period of time," Sigelman said. "Jobs in the carbon economy will continue in great numbers for some time to come."

That said, Sigelman estimates that the renewable energy industry could grow up to 22% over the next five years to a total of 465,000 jobs.

WHAT ABOUT PAY?

It depends on the type of job — and whom you ask. Many in the oil and gas industry say they fear that their wages would shrink if they transitioned to a job in renewable energy. But many economists say incomes might be comparable, whether a worker is laboring in an oil field or a wind farm.

The median annual pay of solar installers was about $44,650 in 2020, according to Emsi. For wind turbine service technicians it was about $52,100.

In the oil industry, derrick operators, rotary drill operators, service unit operators and excavating and loading machine operators earned median annual pay ranging from $44,700 to $55,000, Emsi says. The median for roustabouts and extraction work helpers was $37,000 to $39,000.

Oil and gas field service technicians earn a median of about $39,000 a year, Sigelman said. Those workers could, in theory, transition into such areas as electrical technician work, which pays roughly $25,000 more a year, or construction foreman jobs, whose median is about $27,000 more per year.

SOME JOBS SPAN THE DIVIDE

One point often missed in any debate over green energy vs. fossil fuel jobs is that the line between the two can blur. To install wind turbines, for example, you need truckers, electricians and mechanics.

"It's the same people doing the work," Sentz said. "You call it green, but it's still a trucker."

Likewise, jobs involved in installing or repairing power and transmission lines are critical to both the renewable energy and fossil fuel industries. The renewables growth that Biden envisions will need a massive buildout of transmission and power lines to deliver electricity from the solar farms and wind farms on sunny plains to energy-gulping coasts. Whether for fossil fuel or renewable projects, electrical workers who string the lines are already in demand.

The number of advertisements for job postings in the electric power distribution industry grew 35% in the past two years, Emsi says, and the number for jobs in power and communication line construction rose 63%.

"They're having a hard time finding the people they need for the jobs they're doing," Sentz said.

Power line installers, in demand everywhere, earn around $72,000 a year, higher than some others in the energy sector, according to Emsi.

"Every county in the country needs them," Sentz said.

An electrician who spent 20 years working on transmission lines for coal-fired power plants will be in high-demand when building infrastructure for renewable energy projects, and those tend to be union jobs, said Bob Keefe, executive director of E2, a nonpartisan group that advocates for policies that serve the economy and the environment.

"Stringing power lines is stringing power lines," Keefe said. "We're just doing it better and more efficiently and hooking them up to the right places that need it to move some of the renewable energy that we're producing now where it needs to be."

AP Business Writers Christopher Rugaber in Washington and Tom Krisher in Detroit contributed to this report. All contents © copyright 2021 Associated Press. All rights reserved

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