

FOCUS ON Temporary

Demand returning for skilled temp workers

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There are indeed signs the Chicago area job market is picking up again. One early indicator of activity is an increasing number of temporary job placements.

"One of the terms we use a lot is cautiously optimistic," says Elden DeJarnett, Regional Manager for Robert Half International's Chicago office. "We have seen upticks in accounting, financial, legal and administration placements. It seems companies are loosening up a bit and spending more money for variable staffing."

The U.S. Department of Labor's employment statistics also show an upswing. They report the temporary help services sector added 122,000 jobs in the months of May through July. The 41,000 new jobs created in July of 2003 were 3.7% better than July 2002 numbers, which had represented at 6.0% drop from the same month in 2001.

RHI's divisions include AccounTemps, OfficeTeam, Affiliates (legal placements) and Robert Half Permanent Recruiting; many of which, DeJarnett says, have held relatively steady during the rough job market. "One thing about the accounting and finance fields is that despite the state of the economy, you still need people to run invoices and reconcile the books. That's not to say it's a recession-proof field, but it's still pretty strong."

"It has been a tight market, partly because employees are not leaving their jobs if they can help it. It's not as easy as it used to be to just walk across the street and find a better job."

Another agency that's seen increased activity is Ajilon, whose Chicago area divisions place temporaries in executive support, finance, and legal projects. Branch manager Paul Salasky says they are now getting more orders from first-time clients:

"Our business has probably tripled in the past few months," Salasky notes. "A lot of projects were being handled by interns and students over the summer, but then they went back to school and the projects still needed to be finished."

However, Salasky says the depressed job market has left its mark on salaries. "The market has actually driven pay rates down. Companies' funds are limited, and there are still more people willing to work than there are openings."

The skilled trades and general labor fields have also enjoyed increased placements, according to Mike Varon of OnSite Companies' Schaumburg office. "In our automotive division, we place component makers or distributors for the Big Three, and subsidiary manufac-

turers like Borg Warner. Although there's usually a spike at this time of year as new models are in production, I'd say staffing is 10 percent over even this period last year.

OnSite, North America's largest privately-owned staffing company, places aviation, automotive, energy, scientific, construction, engineering and environmental workers. Varon says many of these areas have shown positive signs since the first of the year. "The energy sector has been flat, but with the blackout in August, we'll expect more activity with new government regulations, and utilities improving the power grid to prevent another one.

"We've usually seen an uptick in our manufacturing placement during June. This June, it didn't happen, but then in August things suddenly picked up. We're starting to see more opportunities for temp to perm assignments, and it's good to see people getting back on their feet," Varon says.

Today's temporary job market includes some differences from those of years past. "One difference...is that everyone, even blue collar workers, now needs to have a resume," Varon says, adding that an electronic resume for an online job search site is a plus. "I coach candidates that they should be registered with several different agencies at one time, and they should keep in touch with those firms whenever their situation changes or when they improve their skills," says Salasky. "A client company doesn't have time to spoon-feed or train someone; they need temps who are able to get the job done as soon as possible. It has to be someone who's willing to do whatever it takes to get the project done. Those are the people who are asked to stay on or get offered permanent jobs."

DeJarnett says the people on assignments for his firm have a much better skill set today than in years past. "Companies with hiring freezes will still bring in a temp because it's cheaper than putting someone on payroll, especially for a peak period like the last week of the month."

A job seeker should consider registering with a temp agency as they often have permanent placement divisions that can help cut through a flood of qualified applicants.

"Lots of companies pay us to find permanent people, because when they run employment ads, they will get 1,500 to 2,000 responses and resumes for a single position," DeJarnett says. "It's quicker for them to call me and say 'I want to see five of your best people,' and I can have them meeting that client before the end of the day."

— Mark McDermott




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