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Florida leads in job gains, but not in job quality

BY NADIA GERGIS
FLORIDA TODAY

Florida led the nation in job creation last year, and gained 131,400 jobs from February 2003 to February 2004, according to the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation.

But Bruce Nissen, director of research at the Center for Labor Research and Studies at Florida International University in Miami, said a closer look at the numbers indicates the statewide numbers aren't all that positive.

"Florida is losing the higher-paying jobs and gaining low-wage jobs," Nissen said. "This is a very sad picture and is not very encouraging for the state. It may be good for numbers, but terrible in terms of job quality."

Nissen, who follows the labor market closely, said the only reason Florida's unemployment is decreasing is that thousands of people are dropping out of the civilian work force because of the lack of high-skilled jobs.

Florida's unemployment rate was 4.5 percent in February, down from 4.6 percent in January and 5.1 percent in February 2003.

"Since the beginning of the recession in March 2001, Florida's working-age population grew at 5.6 percent, but in terms of job growth, Florida only grew at 2.5 percent -- a shortfall of nearly 221,200 jobs," he said. "This is not a good, in terms of job creation and the quality of jobs out there."

On a positive note, he said, the tourism industry has fully recovered since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and that sector is hiring a substantial number of workers.

Joan Van Scyoc, communications manager for the Brevard Workforce Development Board, said, even though the bulk of jobs could be low-wage service-sector jobs, it is still a positive for the economy of Florida, in terms of job creation.

"Other states lost a substantial amount of jobs, while Florida led the nation in terms of job creation," Van Scyoc said.

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David Scott, professor of finance at the University of Central Florida, agreed with Van Scyoc's assessment, but added the state should be doing more to attract more-diverse businesses to create a variety of jobs.

"The job mix needs beefing up," Scott said. "We should be more aggressive with getting the roll-up-your-selves work because attracting an automobile manufacturer in the area would equate to having another Lockheed Martin in Florida."

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