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Orlando area's jobs picture is best in Florida

By HARRY WESSEL
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Florida's unemployment rate dropped last month to its lowest level in four years, with Orlando adding more jobs than any other metro area in the state, the government reported Friday.

From April 2004 to April 2005, Orlando added 42,000 jobs, leading the state to an unemployment rate of 4.2 percent.

That's the lowest statewide rate since April 2001 and a full percentage point below the nation's current jobless rate of 5.2 percent.

Orlando's unemployment rate in April was even lower: 3.8 percent. That's low enough to possibly translate into higher pay for new and current workers, at least in some high-demand fields.

"There is no dark side to this [jobs] report," said David Scott, an economist with the University of Central Florida. "Clearly, the Orlan-

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do labor market is tops in the state. We're really looking at economic strength and stability."

Employment in the four-county metro area grew 4.3 percent during the past year, Scott noted, well ahead of the statewide growth rate of 3 percent. And both those figures dwarfed the nation's 1.7 percent job-creation rate for the same period.

"I'll take a 4.3 percent job-growth rate versus a national rate of 1.7 percent anytime," Scott said. "There is no sign of softness in the Orlando market."

Of the state's six major metropolitan areas, Orlando not only had the lowest unemployment rate and highest growth rate during the past year, it also generated the most new jobs, Scott said.

He noted that the sector creating the most jobs in the metro area wasn't tourism but professional and business services, which added 9,000 jobs in the past 12 months.

Among the professional-service firms adding jobs in April was the Orlando office of Holland & Knight. The law firm has hired eight attorneys and 10 support staff so far this year, which is more people than the firm added in all of 2004.

"When you see construction cranes on the horizon, it's a good time for lawyers," said Bill Wilson, executive partner of the statewide firm's Orlando office. "I think most law firms in Metro Orlando are in a growth mode."

It's not just law firms. Matt Shore, regional managing director of Florida for the recruitment-and-staffing company Spherion, also reported robust job growth in the professional-services sector. He specializes in finding temporary and permanent positions for accountants and information-technology professionals — and both are in high demand locally.

They are in such demand that Shore has increased his recruiting staff from 48 to 64 people during the past year, and his office's revenue has jumped by 35 percent.

With the increased demand for workers with accounting and IT skills, companies are having to rethink their recruitment and retention strategies,

HOT JOBS

Florida's job market continues to sizzle, especially in Orlando:

• Job growth, April 2005 vs. April 2004

1. Orlando +42,000 jobs, up 4.3%
2. Tampa-St. Petersburg +34,400 jobs, up 2.7%
3. Miami +21,200 jobs, up 2.1%

• Orlando's top jobs

- April 2005 vs. 2004:
1. Professional, business services 9,000 jobs added
 2. (tie) Leisure, hospitality 7,400 jobs added
 2. (tie) Trade, transportation, utilities 7,400 jobs added
 4. Construction 4,500 jobs added

Florida's jobless rate best since 2001

Shore said. Employers are learning they have to pay more to attract workers, and increase pay for the workers they have.

"We're seeing a lot of counteroffer activity," Shore said, meaning that companies are having to sweeten the pay of current employees who are being wooed by competitors. "In the specialty sectors I'm focused on, we're seeing salaries coming up."

Statewide, the professional and business-services sector added 60,000 jobs from April 2004 to April 2005. Other leading job-growth sectors statewide, as reported by the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation, were trade, transportation and utilities, 34,600 additional jobs; education and health services, 28,700 jobs; leisure and hospitality, 26,800 jobs; and construction, 25,400 jobs.

Agency spokesman Warren May said Florida again led all other states in the number of jobs created, and its 3 percent job-growth rate was tops among the 10 biggest states.

Even job sectors that lost jobs contained pockets of good news. For example, the manufacturing sector lost 600 jobs statewide, but the subsector of computer and electronic-product manufacturing gained 1,700 jobs — 1,000 of which were tallied in metro Orlando.

CENTRAL FLORIDA UNEMPLOYMENT RATES

	April 2005*	March 2005**	April 2004
Metro			
Orlando	3.8%	4.0%	4.5%
Lake	3.9	4.1	4.3
Orange	3.9	4.0	4.5
Osceola	3.9	4.2	4.5
Seminole	3.6	3.8	4.3
Brevard	3.8	3.9	4.2
Volusia	3.8	4.1	4.3
Polk	4.0	4.2	4.4
Florida	4.2	4.4	4.8
U.S.	5.2	5.2	5.5

NOTE: Local data are not seasonally adjusted; Florida and U.S. data are seasonally adjusted.
*Preliminary figures. **Revised figures.

SOURCE: Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation

LightPath Technologies, which builds optic components for laser and sensing systems, has upped its workforce from 85 to 110 employees during the past year, said the company's chief executive, Ken Brizel.

"We've hired some engineers, but most of the hiring has been in manufacturing operations," said Brizel, who is still looking for an optical engineer and an optical-engineering manager. "We're continuing to grow."