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State's job machine hit high gear in '05

Florida was the top job maker in the U.S., and Orlando was the state's No. 2 market.

By Tim Barker
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Florida created more jobs than any other state in the nation last year, adding new positions more than twice as fast as the national average.

Boosted by the addition of 53,300 jobs in December, the state added a quarter of a million jobs in 2005, growing at 3.3 percent. The national average was 1.5 percent.

Orlando was the second-best market in the state, following the mammoth Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Miami Beach metro area, according to a report released Friday by the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation.

The strong showing offered no surprises to labor market observers, who have watched the state and Central Florida turn in similar performances almost monthly during the past year.

Still, the same old problem

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remains: The mix of jobs being created, particularly in this tourism-driven region, is heavily weighted toward lower-paying positions.

"We're not criticizing the tourism sector. We're just saying that tourism needs some help," said David Scott, an economist and finance professor at the University of Central Florida.

And with the state of this region's home prices — the median nearly hit \$250,000 in November — that issue becomes more critical each month.

"We do need to keep focused on creating value jobs," said Orange County Mayor Richard Crotty, who is pushing plans to build a high-tech corridor near the University of Central Florida.

The surge in new jobs also pushed the state's unemployment rate to a record low 3.3 percent, compared to 4.6 percent a year ago. That's the lowest point since at least 1976, when the current record-keeping system was started.

Orlando's unemployment rate also plummeted, to 2.8 percent from 4.2 percent the previous December.

That's not news to companies that are trying to fill jobs in the face of a shrinking labor pool.

Julie Grinder, district director for the Orlando branch of Spherion, a staffing and recruiting agency, said the firm is spending at least twice as much time and money chasing employees as it was a year ago.

And once a potential employee has been identified, she said there is no time to waste in hiring — there are just too many competing job offers floating around.

"Any employer that really likes someone needs to make that move right away, or they're gone," Grinder said.

Companies also need to examine how and whom they hire, said Kim Cornett, spokeswoman for Workforce Central Florida, which helps link job seekers with employers.

Retiring baby boomers and students are both segments that can be tapped. Retention bonuses and employee referral bonuses can be used to find potential hires, and keep good folks on the payroll.

"Employers have to be creative in how they recruit employees and how they retain their current staff," Cornett said.

The tightening labor force also puts the debate over increases in minimum wage into a different context, said Warren May, a spokesman for Workforce Innovation. Few workers, he said, are making only the mandated minimum.

"With a labor market this tight, there will be even fewer," May said.

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