

Want a Job?

Central Florida's booming economy has left few professional positions unfilled—but the tourism sector has openings aplenty, though pay is low.

By Tim Barker

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Jennifer Tecson has a simple goal in mind as she looks for her next accounting job: She doesn't want to drive more than five miles from her Windermere home.

No traffic. No long drives.

"I don't want to go through those hassles," said Tecson, 47.

And why should she? This is, after all, an ideal time for most job seekers to be picky.

With state and local unemployment rates hovering at or near record lows, employers are being forced to offer signing bonuses, raise starting salaries and even pay their own employees to keep an eye out for good hires.

"It's probably as difficult as it's ever been," said Brian Shanle, a 23-year tourism-industry veteran and general manager of the Nickelodeon Family Suites by Holiday Inn.

In the 12 months that ended in January, the state added more than 300,000 jobs — nearly one in six was in the Orlando area — with a growth rate more than double the national average, according to state figures. The unemployment rate, both in Orlando and the state, was a minuscule 3 percent.

The tight labor market has been created and sustained by several factors, including the nation's strong economy and the mix of jobs being created here. They tend

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to be lower-paying positions that accompany a tourism-dominated economy.

And with home prices soaring in recent years, living in the area has become much more difficult for people in those low-wage jobs, particularly when factoring in a scarcity of apartments for rent.

"I think it's quite a puzzle," said Bob Allsbrook, chief economist for AmSouth Bank, who monitors the Florida market.

Solutions

Like other businesses in the tourist corridor, Shanle's Holiday Inn, near Walt Disney World, is in the midst of a major hiring push as it gears up for the busy summer travel season. With 100 or so jobs to fill, Shanle knows he has a tough fight ahead.

"The best people: You are trying to steal them," Shanle said. "They're already employed. We're looking to attract them to our brand."

Across the region, and really the state, it's the same story for employers large and small:

■ SeaWorld Orlando already has raised its starting wage by 20 cents to \$7 an hour as summer approaches. The company also is tailoring its recruiting, benefits and work schedules to make it more attractive to the types of employees it is targeting.

"We realize that things that attract retirees are different from those that attract 17-year-olds," said Christine O'Neal, SeaWorld's vice president for human resources. "A young person might want to work during spring break and summer. Older workers might not want to work during the hottest months of the year."

■ Bill Heard Chevrolet in Sanford is offering signing bonuses of \$6,000 for experienced car salespeople as part of the company's push to fill 20 positions. Guessing how long it will take to find that many workers is a tough call, said Harry Malamatos, the dealership's recruiting and training director.

"It may take another month. It may take two months," Malamatos said. "A couple of years ago, it was a different story."

■ At Smart City, a Lake Buena Vista telecommunications company, employees are being given \$100 bonuses whenever they refer someone who is hired. There's a similar program in place at a pair of Lake County hospitals — Leesburg Regional Medical Center and The Villages Regional Hospital — where employees are rewarded for finding registered nurses.

The Villages facility is in the midst of a two-year expansion that will require an additional 450 workers and more creativity to fill those jobs. So the hospital is taking a multipronged approach that includes a billboard on Florida's Turnpike and a Web site aimed at out-of-state nurses, RNsLoveFlorida.com, said Darlene Stone, vice president of human resources for the hospitals.

■ Verizon Wireless is offering several nonstandard benefits, including a baby-sitting service that helps single parents with sick children. The charge is \$2 an hour if the child is taken to a child-care facility and \$4 an hour if the sitter comes to the home, said spokesman Chuck Hamby. And there's the \$10 baby: a maternity benefit that limits a worker's out-of-pocket costs to \$10.

Jobs abound locally—if lower pay isn't a concern

Unpleasant alternative

The jobs landscape has employers fretting about their pay scales and benefits packages, while also worrying about who might be courting their top workers. Having to work so hard, however, beats the alternative, said David Scott, an economist and finance professor at the University of Central Florida.

Scott suggested local companies should revel in the difficulties created by a strong economy.

"The alternative is a recession," Scott said. "You don't get it both ways."

That's a message that resounds with Tom May, owner of The Great Frame Up in Winter Springs.

Business is strong enough that May is considering opening a second franchise. The only problem is that he still needs to fill a part-time job at his current location before focusing on the future.

A recent advertisement for the job generated 10 applicants — about a sixth of what he expected.

"I'll probably have to pay a little more than I would like to," said May of the \$8-to-\$12-an-hour position.

Same old story

Often lost in all the glowing reports about the state's red-hot job production is the relative absence of higher-paying jobs, particularly in the manufacturing and technology sectors.

The past year witnessed only modest growth in the manufacturing sector, with the entire state adding 3,600 jobs in that sector during the 12-month period that ended in January. In comparison, the leisure and hospitality sector added 38,200 jobs in the same period.

"That's the story of Central Florida. That's the story of the state of Florida," said Allsbrook, the AmSouth Bank economist.

And it was the story for Linda Medina, 50, who searched eight months for a graphic-design position before taking a position as an office manager for a physical-therapy clinic in Kissimmee.

It was a long, frustrating search that forced her to sift through countless jobs offering \$8 to \$10 an hour — not enough to support a family, she said.

"You see the newspaper. There are so many job opportunities out there," Medina said. "But professional jobs like the kind I used to do? Very little."