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Temp jobs much in demand

More job applicants find themselves overqualified as unemployment rises

By Kristen Kridel

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After losing their jobs, Greg and Gloria Christ drove through office parks, jotting down the names of potential employers. Eventually they tried a more direct route to getting work: a temporary-help agency.

"At this point in time, I think even if there was something that was temporary it could become full time later on," said Gloria Christ of Palatine, a former customer service professional with nearly two decades of managerial experience. The Christs wound up seeking the help of Banner Personnel Service in Schaumburg.

As the economy continues to struggle, more unemployed workers with years of professional experience are willing to take jobs for which they are overqualified, experts say.

Local temporary agencies report being flooded—and not just with recent graduates or retirees looking for part-time gigs. People who should be at the pinnacle of their careers also are flocking to their doors, said Janet Sloan, president of Seville Staffing in Chicago.

"What I have seen is the increase in prime-aged individuals who are actively seeking just about anything," she said. "There is definitely an increase in qualified candidates."

It's hard to say how many people are overqualified for their jobs. Those workers aren't calculated in the Department of Labor's underemployment rate, which spiked to 13.9 percent in January, said Heidi Shierholz, an economist with the labor-oriented Economic Policy Institute in Washington.

Only the unemployed are included with people who have recently given up their job searches and those who would prefer full-time work to their part-time jobs.

Although not measured in federal data, over-qualification is a form of underemployment and very much on the rise, Shierholz said.

"When you have productive, hardworking people who can't maximize their potential, the productivity the



economy would have gotten from them is gone," she said. "It disappeared. You can never get it back."

Among those taking the temp agency route is Damon Karras, a former manager at an advertising marketing firm with six years of sales experience and a biology degree who has been out of work since October.

Months of searching for a position in such fields as the garment industry and pharmaceutical sales turned up nothing. So a few weeks ago, he found himself at a staffing agency taking a typing test, which is required to land a temporary clerical job.

"I've got to do whatever I can," said Karras of Chicago. "My rent alone is 1,500 bucks."

That sentiment has been reverberating in temporary agencies throughout the area, officials say.

A year ago, less than 10 percent of the workers placed locally through Manpower employment service took jobs for which they were overqualified, said Anne Edmunds, regional director of the global company, which has almost 50 offices in Illinois. Now 20 to 25 percent fit into that category.

"People are more than willing to try new occupations, much more willing than they were even a year ago," she said.

Compared with two years ago, the number of local, degree-holding professionals seeking help at Manpower has increased by 35 to 40 percent, Edmunds said. Those with master's degrees are up about 5 to 10 percent.

"I can tell you we've had a licensed attorney come in and want temporary work as office support," said Sloan of Seville Staffing.

Gloria Christ, 51, was formerly a national project manager for an information technology consulting company who helped coordinate the installation of WiFi hot spots at 7,000 locations nationwide. Now she would consider an office manager position.

"Sometimes you can go in at a low level to interview just to get your foot in the door," she said.

Aaron Brooks, managing director of The Mergis Group's Chicago office, said the employment agency used to have to recruit people who had more credentials, especially advanced degrees. These days he sees more candidates with MBAs and CPAs reaching out to his agency.

Many have never been out of a job and their outstanding credentials often work against them, he said.

Although many professionals are willing to take a pay cut just to be employed, companies frequently turn away overqualified applicants for fear they will leave as soon as the economy picks up, Brooks said.

"You sometimes do sense some desperation in people," he said.

And it's apparent at all levels.

John Vanderschuit, 22, received an associate's degree in graphic design in the spring. Despite an internship at a television studio, he said there's little hope he will get a job in his desired field anytime soon.

But the real surprise came when he applied for a job at Hollywood Video. With about two years of experience at Blockbuster under his belt, he figured he would be a shoo-in. Instead he was told he was

overqualified and turned away.

Tired of "hitting a bunch of dead ends," he decided it was time to try an employment agency.

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