

GEORGIA'S ECONOMY: Job market's split personality: Some sectors up, some sectors down --- or both. Competition for business intensifies while many jobless diversify search.

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Like a pack of confused hunting dogs, the economic signals in Georgia are pointing in several directions at once.

Among the data hounds, the most-watched number is the state's unemployment rate, which has ticked downwards tentatively the past several months, slipping to 9.7 percent in December.

That looks good compared to double digits, where it has spent most of its time since 2008. The direction, at least, is promising. And talks with experts and interviews with companies that are hiring, paints the picture of an economy that is indeed making progress unsteadily and unevenly, with hiring up in some sectors and down in others.

"It's a bifurcated economy," said Rajeev Dhawan, director of the Economic Forecasting Center at Georgia State University. "One part grows, one part doesn't. All of this makes for a question mark going forward."

The odds of finding a paycheck are always better in boom times, but even in the worst of economies, there's always some hiring. It's just that job-seekers outnumber openings by better than four to one, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Improving your chances often depends on looking in a hot sector, having scarce skills or targeting a company that is out-competing its rivals.

Sometimes even in the same sector there are conflicting directions: Production of durable goods, like planes and vehicles, is up, Dhawan said. "But non-durable goods, like textiles, are down."

Nearly 460,000 Georgians are unemployed and looking for work, according to the state labor department. More than half of them have been out of work six months or longer.

Georgia is, Dhawan said, the only one of the nation's dozen largest states that has not added jobs in the past 12 months.

One reason for that are cuts in government jobs, down more than 22,000 in the past year, said Labor Commissioner Mark Butler.

"Take the government job losses out of the equation and we actually had a gain over the year," Butler said.

It's not hard to find other sectors that are still reeling from the hardest and longest economic pounding the state has seen since the Great Depression.

The worst damage was done to tens of thousands of jobs connected to real estate --- from bricklayers to bankers to brokers.

More than 40 percent of all construction jobs have evaporated since the collapse of the housing bubble. Losses have slowed, but not ended. The sector shed more than 11,000 jobs in the past year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Yet even in a weak sector like construction, there is demand --- for the right workers.

When an employer sifts through thousands of job-seekers, it may not turn up enough workers with the right skills, said Teresa Magnus, chief executive of Birmingham-based Vulcan Industrial Contractors.

Vulcan has been working on a utility project in Atlanta that requires 200 workers --- more than 40 of them with specialized skills, she said.

"We struggled all of 2011 to find skilled welders and insulators," Magnus said.

But with residential building nearly non-existent and commercial building slow at best, the story is still mostly one of too many people with too few jobs. The boom market on which the economy --- and so many Georgians --- depended is gone.

Strong over the weak

Inside troubled sectors, however, there is hiring since some companies thrive by taking business from rivals.

Six years ago, about 80 percent of the business at Sundial Plumbing Services of Marietta was tied to new construction. Now, that accounts for 2 percent, said owner Mitzi Smith Moore.

Yet the 42-worker company survived without any layoffs by retooling its approach and its offerings, she said: 90 percent of its business is now in service and the rest is in remodeling.

"I've seen a stabilization of the economy. We are seeing a little more activity," Moore said.

In other fields too, lack of market growth is an opportunity for strong companies to take business from the weak.

Pest-control specialist Terminix is adding 45 jobs --- mostly inside sales positions --- in Norcross this quarter, said Heather Wilson, a spokeswoman for corporate parent, the ServiceMaster Co. of Memphis.

A sister company, American Home Shield, has already hired 32 sales jobs in LaGrange and plans to add 30 more customer service and other jobs in the year's second quarter, Wilson said.

Overall, layoffs seem to have ebbed a bit: The number of people in metro Atlanta filing first-time unemployment claims in December was down 14 percent from a year ago, the Labor Department reported.

The white-collar world has started to perk up, say some staffing companies.

Tennille Hall, vice president of Accounting Principals Inc. in Atlanta, said she's seen increased demand for accountants and information technology specialists.

"If you have a 'demand skill-set,' if you are dedicated and want to work, there's a place for you," she said.

Baby boomer boom

Hiring for marketing pros --- sometimes seen as a luxury in tough times --- has been picking up, according to Jodi Gill, president of the Experts Bench in Duluth.

The company provides marketing executives to hundreds of the world's largest corporations, she said.

"We are starting to see money moving in the marketplace. Our business has almost doubled from a year ago. We've especially had a lot of demand for consultants in the last 90 days."

But there are also sectors where companies can look to steady growth by riding the demographics.

For instance, providing services to the advancing, aging wave of baby boomers as they reach retirement and beyond seems like the closest thing available to having guaranteed demand.

Lenbrook, a retirement community along Peachtree Road in Brookhaven, has swelled to about 400 residents and expects to reach 500 eventually, said Chris Keysor, the organization's chief financial officer.

Lenbrook has 200 employees and 45 others on contract. They hire workers for dining room services, housekeeping, maintenance, fitness programs and medical services, too, like nursing.

With the entrance fee ranging from \$124,000 to \$1.3 million, Lenbrook does depend on the larger economy, since potential residents are more likely to spend the money when their investments are doing well.

The community is also likely to benefit from having a rising pool of possible residents. Currently, the average age of residents is 85.8 years, but the front edge of the 78 million boomer

wave is turning 66 this year. The growing number of seniors also fuels a market serving people who may need help, but not in a nursing home or hospital.

For instance, AmeriCare, a nationally franchised company, offers a range of services, from assistance with hygiene to rides to the grocery store to just keeping someone company, said Doug Lueder, owner of the largest area franchise.

Growth is driven partly by the aging population, partly by the desire of many to keep family members in their own homes when they are disabled or sick.

"I have to keep recruiting and hiring," he said.

New migrant workers

In the past year, his company has grown from 75 to 155 employees and is hiring 50 staffers in the next month --- especially nursing assistants, he said.

"When I get a call, it's usually not somebody planning to need help six months in advance," he said. "They need somebody now."

Job seekers inevitably move from stagnant sectors to those that are hiring.

Eryn Bennett came back to Atlanta after 15 years in Dallas where her last job was as a volunteer coordinator for a hospice program.

Bennett, 51, returned with a plan to distribute a new software for computers and cellphones, but that didn't work out. She unsuccessfully applied for retail jobs and worked for awhile as a caterer --- but the hours were long and inconsistent.

Finally, she found a job at Lenbrook in the dining service, but it didn't pay well, the hours weren't great and it wasn't what she liked doing. There was an opening for assistant activities director --- but a commercial driver's license was required.

On the side, she enrolled at Atlanta Truck Driving School. Three months later, she had the license --- and was hired to help run activities at Lenbrook.

"It is hard to find a job with a regular paycheck," she said. "But this is just heaven-sent. I absolutely love and adore my job."

Kim Gaines was a case manager for a large, health care corporation. She was a correctional officer. She was an assistant teacher in day care.

For the past five months, Gaines, 37, has been a personal care assistant for AmeriCare, driving to the homes of clients, helping them bathe or prepare medicine, taking their vital signs, driving them to doctors' appointments. Her main responsibility now is an 80-something woman who has a reputation for difficult behavior.

"It's my God-sent calling to do what I do," she said. "I have to put myself in their shoes and think of it as: She could be my mother or my grandmother. So I have smoothed her over and buttered her up, and she's my baby."

And there's one other route to a job: hire yourself. Mike Carpenter founded MDC Interiors five years ago as a design business for homes and companies. An artist, Carpenter, 33, is also studying for a master's degree full-time at Georgia Tech.

He has work, but is --- so far --- the only employee.

"There aren't a lot of people who do what I do," he said. "Hopefully, in the next few years, we will be able to grow and hire full-time employees."

Georgia's Job Market

[UP] RESIDENCES AND SERVICES FOR SENIORS --- The tsunami of Baby Boomer retirements is starting to break.

[UP] HOME CARE SERVICES --- Growing as a cheaper alternative to hospitals and nursing homes.

[DOWN] TELECOMMUNICATIONS --- Once the crest of the growth wave in the state, but now shrinking.

[UP] TRUCKING --- Commercial drivers are in demand.

[DOWN] GOVERNMENT --- Accounts for the largest share of job losses in the past year.

[UP] --- LEISURE AND HOSPITALITY --- Hotel, restaurant and convention business getting marginally better.

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Georgia's job market

The AJC has been covering how the economic crisis is changing how businesses and consumers behave. Today we look how numbers give a hint at what is ahead. With Georgia unemployment slowly declining but still high, the current state of the job market varies from sector to sector.

Health care --- One of the few sectors that has expanded consistently.

Construction --- Despite a good December, the sector has lost 40 percent of its jobs in Georgia. But there's a shortage of employees in some skilled trades.

Manufacturing --- A schizoid story, with production up in durable goods like planes and cars, but down in less-valuable commodities.

More sectors on D3

Source: Georgia Department of Labor; staff research

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