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ON THE CLOCK

How to Handle a Job Market That's Worse Than It Looks

It's time to change your attitude and approach as gloomier employment picture comes into focus

The official story of the job market is finally catching up to the harsh reality. Job seekers have complained for some time now—to me, their friends, pets or anyone who will listen—that it is deceptively hard to get hired.

Normal people don't wear out the refresh button on BLS.gov when the federal government is about to drop new employment data, like I do. But they know in broad strokes that the numbers continued to look good long after the postpandemic hiring frenzy subsided. Many felt a disconnect between those rosy stats and their own experiences.

Wednesday's interest-rate cut by the Federal Reserve and the recent downward revision to the government's estimate of U.S. job growth confirm what a lot of folks sensed: The labor market is weaker than it appeared. The Bureau of Labor Statistics now says the country added less than half as many jobs as originally reported during a recent 12-month period.

"It's vindicating," says Heather Reynolds of Dallas, who has been looking for work since being laid off by a financial-services company in March. "There's nothing worse than walking into my parents' house and having my dad say, 'What

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are you doing with this job search?" "Like a lot of people, Reynolds, 53, has dealt with the implication that she must be doing something wrong. She hopes that will change as the true challenge of landing a job becomes clearer.

A little grace

It's nice to have evidence to support your frustration, but being right won't get you a job. That's why acting on recent news—not just saying “told ya so”—could be key to improving your prospects. Note

Step one might be working the gloomier hiring picture into your jobhunting narrative. Reynolds is an experienced recruiter who knows unemployment can be a self-perpetuating cycle. Prospective employers sometimes see applicants who've been out of work for a while as tainted, assuming they would have been hired sooner if they were good candidates.

Now, at least, you can note that you're caught in a widespread hiring slowdown if you get the dreaded “résumé gap” question in a job interview. Just try not to come off whiny. Go for a subtle reminder that long-term unemployment isn't necessarily due to individual shortcomings.

Remind yourself of this, too. Understanding the landscape can help protect your confidence amid a trying job search. Note use of Term -

Digital marketer Austra Zubkovs has been looking for her next full-time job for about a year and a half while working as an independent consultant. She's open to relocating from Albany and takes some comfort in knowing she is far from alone. "I don't even feel embarrassed anymore," says Zubkovs, 39. "Part of me feels like I should, but so many people are in this spot."

Network, seriously

Kristen Hermanson is one of them. She went more than two decades without having to hunt for a job as she climbed the ranks on Paramount's communications team. Then she was part of a large layoff last year and has been looking ever since.

In hindsight, she underinvested in networking when times were good.

"I thought LinkedIn was just something for people who are unemployed," says Hermanson, who is in her late 40s and lives in the Los Angeles area. "Now I'm in it."

She's making up for lost time by sending 50 connection requests a week. And she doesn't reach out only to people she thinks could help find a job. Hermanson contacts just about anyone who seems interesting, often asking to meet on **Zoom**.

Some blow her off, but not all. She says she's had fascinating discussions with people in other states and countries including Australia, India and Egypt.

If nothing else, this exercise sharpens her conversation skills for job interviews. Plus, you never know when a connection will pay dividends, and it's always better to form a relationship before you need to ask a favor.

You've likely heard sermons about the importance of networking, but this is a moment to pay attention. Our efforts tend to sag when we feel comfortable in our roles. Or when the job market looks strong because we assume we'll be fine. It should be apparent at this point that our positions, and the employment situation overall, aren't so stable.

Read data differently

Kyara Franzen learned the hard way that there are no guarantees. She quit her job as an administrative assistant two years ago, confident she'd easily land another one. Her plan was to complete a medical office professional certificate program, living on savings and her partner's income in the meantime.

Five months after graduating, she remains unemployed. She feels she had a false impression of the job market's health when she walked away from her last position.

"I'm going to look at the numbers with skepticism and not take them as reality going forward," says Franzen, 50, who is looking for jobs in Colorado or North Carolina.

It's tempting to dismiss jobmarket reports as unreliable, but a better approach is to look at them differently.

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"I would discourage anybody from throwing them out," says Damon Yarnell, associate provost and executive director of career development at the University of Richmond.

He advises students and job seekers to focus on trends instead of fixating on raw numbers that are prone to revisions. That means paying attention to which industries and regions show steady signs of growth, rather than basing your view of the job market on the monthly totals that make headlines.

Sounds like good advice, but brace yourself as you do your research. Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, where I've spent much of my career, rank 47th and 51st in year-over-year employment gains by percentage.

Excuse me while I send a few LinkedIn connection requests to people in South Carolina and New Mexico, which rank first and second.

CALLUM BORCHERS

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