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US loses 85,000 jobs, but hopes grow for future employment

December saw losses of 85,000 jobs, but Friday's labor report also showed a small employment gain in November, the first since the recession began in December 2007.



On Tuesday, Nick Rodriguez looked up job listings for tow-truck drivers in a New York employment-services office in Brooklyn. The US economy lost 85,000 jobs in December, the Labor Department reported Jan. 8. But there are hopeful signs for future employment gains.

Mark Lennihan/AP

By Laurent Belsie Staff writer / January 8, 2010

The job market isn't improving – not yet, anyway. But signs of future growth keep popping up.

To begin with, the US actually gained 4,000 jobs in November, according to revised data released by the Department of Labor on Friday. That upward revision in November makes December's unexpectedly big loss of 85,000 jobs look all the more stark.

Still, the November total (which is still preliminary) marks the first time in 23 months that the US has actually gained jobs.

Another hopeful sign is temporary employment, which typically turns up before full-time employment does. Since bottoming out in July, that sector has grown by 166,000 – 47,000 in December alone.

"Companies, when they come out of recession, they tend to hire temporary workers first to do critical projects that they need to get done," says Scot Melland, president and CEO of Dice Holdings, which runs specialized career websites in the technology, financial services, and healthcare industries. "As their confidence [in the recovery] builds, they shift over to full-time hiring."

Mr. Melland is seeing the same improvement in his own business. On its database of technology professionals, searches by recruiters were up in the fourth quarter, he says. The number of job listings on the company's websites has also been growing.

Other recruitment services are also seeing an increase in activity.

"2010 is going to be brighter than 2009, no doubt," says Nancy Holland, a vice president at DirectEmployers Association, a nonprofit human-resources consortium focused on recruiting by Fortune 1000 companies. In a recent survey of its members, all 60 companies that responded planned to hire this year.

The hiring was across the board in terms of industries and types of positions, not merely to replace workers but to add to corporations' head counts, Ms. Holland says. "It's not a boom. It's not a wow ... but it's definitely getting better."

Even American workers are more optimistic, according to a telephone survey conducted in December by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of SnagAJob.com. One in four working Americans said they believed the job market was improving; one in three hadn't yet seen an improvement but was optimistic that things would improve soon.

How are you feeling about the job market? Let us know on Twitter.

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