



Expecting A Spring Thaw, Shops And Restaurants Warm To Hiring

April 04, 2014

By Marilyn Geewax

As winter loosens its grip, employers are taking on more help.

Hotels, bars and restaurants added 33,000 workers, while retailers tacked on 21,000 jobs in March, the Labor Department said Friday. Economists say those increases suggest employers are growing more confident that Americans will be spending more this year.

"Consumers still have the wherewithal to make discretionary purchases and were just waiting for the snow to be plowed and the temperatures to rise to resume spending," IHS Global Insight chief U.S. economist Doug Handler wrote in his analysis.

The Labor Department report showed that all together, employers added 192,000 jobs in March.

That hiring boost encouraged people to resume their job hunts, pushing up the labor force participation rate to 63.2 percent, from 63 percent the previous month. With more people filling out job applications, there was no improvement in the unemployment rate. It held steady at 6.7 percent.

Still, that was a big improvement over last year's 7.6 percent.

This year's pace of hiring is "consistent with a moderately growing economy at present and a faster-growing economy later this year," Handler said.

The sense that the economy is thawing out after "a long, harsh winter" was echoed by Matthew Shay, who heads the National Retail Federation, a trade

group for store owners. "Merchants are eager to move forward with their spring hiring and operational plans," he said in a statement.

The positive momentum also showed up in the construction sector, where employers added 19,000 jobs. Over the past year, construction employment has risen by 151,000.

That hiring helped March mark a milestone: private-sector employment returned to the pre-recession level of 2007.

"Not only have U.S. firms finally brought back all of the 8.8 million jobs that were lost since the last recession, total employment in the private sector stands at an all-time high of 116.09 million," wrote **Bernard Baumohl, chief global economist for The Economic Outlook Group.**

Government employment remains below 2007 levels, thanks to local, state and federal budget cuts.

And job gains still haven't done much to help the long-term unemployed. More than 10 million people continue to look for work — with more than a third of them unemployed for 27 weeks or more.

With so much slack in the job market, workers continue to have a tough time getting a raise. Average hourly earnings decreased by 1 cent to \$24.30 in March — a disappointment following February's 9-cent increase.

But here's one good sign: The workweek grew longer, with the average employee putting in 34.5 hours, a 0.2-hour gain over February.

And the news was even better for factory workers. The average workweek in the manufacturing sector hit 42 hours in March — tied for the highest level since July 1945. That means many factory workers got overtime pay, which could help boost spending for Easter outfits and food in April.

The data show "the recovery is continuing to unfold," said Jason Furman, chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers. But the White House believes growth would improve if Congress would reinstate expired benefits for the long-term unemployed and raise the minimum wage, he said.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said Congress should do more to help job growth by expanding energy production, improving job training and

"protecting families and small businesses" from the Affordable Care Act.
"I'm glad more Americans have found work, but our economy still isn't
creating jobs for the American people at the rate they were promised."

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