

Companies Post More Jobs But Fill Them Slowly

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- U.S. employers advertised the most job openings in nearly five years in February, but they boosted hiring at a much slower pace. The figures suggest that companies remain too cautious about the economy to quickly fill open jobs.

The number of openings rose 8.7 percent in February from January to a seasonally adjusted 3.93 million, the Labor Department said Tuesday. That was the most since May 2008.

At the same time, companies hired a seasonally adjusted 4.4 million people, just 2.8 percent more than in January. And hiring remains lower than it was a year ago, when it reached 4.49 million.

Economists point to several likely reasons for the disparity between a surge in job openings but only a modest rise in hiring. Many unemployed workers may lack the skills employers want. Some companies may not be offering enough pay.

And recruiting and staffing firms say some employers seem reluctant to fill jobs until they find what they regard as perfect candidates.

U.S. hiring slowed sharply in March, despite the increase in job openings the previous month. Employers added only 88,000 jobs last month, the government reported Friday. That was the fewest in nine months and nearly half the pace of the previous six months.

Some companies may also have slowed hiring after steep government spending cuts began taking effect March 1. Those cuts are expected to shave about a half-point from economic growth this year.

There were 3.1 unemployed people, on average, for each opening in February. That exceeds the roughly 2-to-1 ratio typical of a healthy economy. But it's down sharply from a peak of 6.7 in July 2009, the highest in the 12 years the government has tracked the data.

Still, until employers start filling jobs more quickly, the ratio of unemployed people to openings may overstate the health of the job market.

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