

## Sticking a toe into pool of applicants

*Businesses slowly make hires from 'flood' of resumé*

Signals that the job market is on the verge of an uptick are starting to emerge across New Jersey, with employers poised to rebuild a work force devastated by two years of recession.

Scott Rasmussen just hired three employees, and plans to add a few more next year. "We've outgrown our ability to function without more staff," he said. "And we're flooded with great resumé — a lot of very good people are looking for work. This is a good time to be hiring."

His 11-person Asbury Park Internet media company, Rasmussen Reports, conducts public opinion polls by telephone on a wide range of issues, from political races in all 50 states to whether Tiger Woods gets too much media attention. Their motto: "If it's in the news, it's in our polls."

The firm's monthly poll on the state of the job market has been rather pessimistic as of late, so Rasmussen was surprised when the government reported that the November unemployment rate had declined to 10 percent and job losses of 11,000 were far below the forecasts.

"That news was just stunningly good, and I'm hopeful it will continue," he said. "But sometimes we get false signals. We'll have to wait until January and February to see where it goes from here."

Like Rasmussen, close watchers of the economy say it's too soon to tell if these recovery rumblings are forecasting a brighter future.

Employers "are slowly starting to hire—we're seeing more hiring activity now than we've seen in the last 18 months," said Harvey Bass, president of the staffing company Stascom Technologies, in Sparta. Smaller companies are leading the way: He estimated that "30 [percent] to 40 percent of New Jersey companies with 50 to 100 employees are hiring one or two people. It's not enough to change the unemployment rate, but it's a lot better than if nobody were hiring." In particular, information technology and banking jobs are opening up, he said.

Depot America, in Farmington, which services and supplies computer printer parts, recently added three people to its staff of 125, and "we're hoping to hire more in the near term," said Tom O'Donnell, vice president of operations.

"I don't know if the economy has turned a corner, but we are adding new customers and we've seen a growth in business from our existing customers," he said.

The engineering firm **GEI Consultants** has hired 17 professionals in recent months at its offices in Mount Laurel, Montclair and on Long Island.

"We have changed as the economy has changed, and now we are positioned to pick up redevelopment work as it comes in the door," said Christopher Dailey, who heads the Mount Laurel office. He works with Susan Boyle, who joined GEI after a 25-year career in New Jersey state government and is interim president of the New Jersey Licensed Site Remediation Professionals Association, whose members will oversee environmental cleanup work under a new state law.

"We are just starting to see an uptick" in proposals from developers looking to clean and redevelop brownfield sites, Boyle said.

Dailey said the engineer shortage during the economic boom made hiring difficult, but now, "some of our competitors have let people go, and we've taken advantage of it and picked up some very good talent."

Staffing company Snelling, in Eatontown, is seeing new activity from old clients.

"In the last week, I've heard from companies that haven't placed an order in six months," said Koleen Singerline, senior vice president at Snelling. "We're beginning to see companies waking up."

Christine Rowe, regional manager for New Jersey at Robert Half International, hears some positive, but cautious signals.

"We are starting to hear some rumblings about hiring, but companies are waiting for evidence of a stronger economy before they go ahead and expand their teams," Rowe said.

Michael D. Zinn, who heads his own executive search firm in Lawrenceville, said he recently met with the human resources director of a big bank. "He had just come from a meeting with his boss, who wants him to hire 300 new revenue-producers," Zinn said. But the bank has not yet given this HR director the go-ahead — or the budget — to do the hiring, Zinn said. "Companies will only spend the money to hire when the pressure builds up and they see their competitors eat into their market share — then the wheels start turning and we'll have a war for talent again. But it is not yet a war for talent."

Assuming there are no new shocks to the financial system, hiring will soon pick up, Zinn said. "The dam will break when people start worrying about their competition instead of worrying about their expenses."