

The Miami Herald

Posted on Sun, Dec. 20, 2009

Florida's job market got ice cold during the recession

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PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD

Barbara Ferreira worked in accounting for several years, but returned to school to pursue a nursing career.

When the job market gets tough, the tough get going -- back to school.

With Florida's unemployment rate the highest since Gerald Ford was president in the mid 1970s, thousands of state residents are going back to school.

Take Barbara Ferreira as an example. After being laid off as an accounting manager -- and realizing that accounting jobs are scarce as hen's teeth -- she decided to go to nursing school. She finished her prerequisite classes last week and starts her first nursing class at Miami Dade College on Jan. 5.

She's hoping to get into a program whereby South Florida Workforce, the state-sponsored employment agency, will pay for her classes, and a job at the University of Miami Hospital should be waiting for her when she graduates in 15 to 18 months.

Plus, she has been dreaming of a career in health care since she was a girl in Cuba.

"This was my passion," said Ferreira, 36. "This was my dream."

Ferreira isn't the only one hitting the books. Enrollment at Broward College, for example, was up 23 percent this fall compared to two years ago. MDC is up 8 percent in the same period, and the average student is taking more credits.

And it's not just community colleges seeing increases.

Many graduate programs also are enrolling more students as workers either decide to change careers or upgrade their skills in current occupations.

"There are a lot of people in that position, either because they were let go or their position is kind of tanking," said Luis Casas, spokesman for Florida International University's business school. Some people use the opportunity to go back and get an MBA, he said: "This is a trigger to say, 'Maybe right now is the right time to do this.'"

The University of Miami's architecture school enrolled 75 master's students this year, up 12 percent from 2008, said Dean Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. A major reason: the architecture job market is miserable right now, with firms cutting anywhere from 20 to 60 percent of their staffs, Plater-Zyberk said.

Those who still have a job often face shorter hours or pay cuts.

But in the long term, architects will be in demand, Plater-Zyberk predicted.

“There will once again be a need,” she said.

In that vein, The Miami Herald has identified this year's “hot jobs” -- positions where either there are openings now or opportunities are expected to grow after the economy improves in the next couple of years. The Herald's business section will feature articles on each of these occupations during the next few weeks.

MARKET CHALLENGE

Finding such jobs proved more of a challenge this year than last. For 2008's list, we were able to find nine occupations with more-or-less immediate openings, pay of at least \$11 an hour, and, in most cases, a training requirement of a year or less.

Since then, however, South Florida has lost another 73,000 jobs.

Even the health care sector, which accounted for four of last year's nine hot jobs, has slowed down, although statistics show it's still growing.

Nursing remains the quintessential Hot Job, with many jobs still available and a starting wage above \$24 an hour in South Florida.

But nursing isn't for everyone, so The Herald identified some other options, too.

This year's Hot Jobs list includes: physician assistant, imaging technician, dental hygienist, respiratory therapist, medical coder, genetics researcher, environmental engineer, manufacturing technician and air-traffic controller.

CHECK IT OUT

It's worth noting that the job market is changing fast, so potential career-changers need to be more careful than ever before making a switch. They should carefully research a new career path before embarking, and take a hard look at the job market in that field, say experts.

For instance, workers new to health care may want to take a nonclinical job at a hospital or volunteer for awhile to get a sense of the types of jobs available and the nature of the workplace.

Another option is to work for a while as a patient care technician, a kind of nurse's aide that requires only a few months of schooling.

“Don't go in blank,” said Suzanne Luongo, clinical education manager for the Memorial Healthcare System, which operates South Broward's public hospitals. “Try it for six months or a year. When they get to the reality of the job it's not what they think it is. Its not *Scrubs*, its not *Grey's Anatomy*.”

“You're looking for Dr. McDreamy. That's Hollywood and not Hollywood, Florida.”

Nova Southeastern University's office of career development gives similar advice to its students.

“We recommend they do internships and try the career out,” said Shari Saperstein, the office's

director. "Immersing yourself in the environment is going to be incredibly helpful. You can see if it's a good fit for you."

If that's not possible, the prospective career-changer should at least talk with people in the field. She also recommends the Labor Department's career guide, the Occupational Outlook Handbook, which is available online.

MAKING PREDICTIONS

That said, the job market can be hard to predict.

For example, last year's hot jobs included medical assistants, nuclear power plant operators, paralegals, pharmacy technicians, physical therapists, police officers, special education teachers, surgical technologists, and Web application developers. Some of those, such as the medical fields, still offer good opportunities, but others have fallen off.

Many law firms have laid off paralegals -- and even full-fledged attorneys -- as business dropped off over the past year, while government budget cuts have reduced the opportunities for police officers and special education teachers.

Some fields will likely recover in the years to come -- it's never easy to find people with the temperament and background to be cops, for instance -- but others are harder to predict.

So while we included manufacturing technician -- a job in biotechnology -- on our list, indicators in that industry are mixed.

On one hand, Florida leaders have put up millions of dollars to attract biotech research firms to the region. Still, major local biotech employers such as Boston Scientific have decided recently to move hundreds of manufacturing jobs to other countries.

While today's job market seems hard to predict, that doesn't make it different from the past, said University of Florida Economist David Denslow. Truth be told, the government occupational employment forecasts have always been unreliable, Denslow said, pointing to 2005 predictions from the federal Labor Department calling for strong job opportunities in construction trades through 2014. In the current downturn, construction has been one of the areas hit hardest by unemployment.

SOME GOOD NEWS

One piece of good news, though: The state's community colleges are good at adapting quickly and offering new courses that meet employer needs, Denslow said. So if biotech doesn't work out, schools such as MDC and Broward College will be offering classes in the new new thing.

"When you need retraining in five years," Denslow said, "they'll be there and they will be ready to train you in whatever that is."