

In bad economic times, people turning to temp work

By Jessica Young
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As a single mom with four mouths to feed, 44-year-old Theresa Jordan should have panicked when a recent aneurysm rendered her unable to work. But she didn't.

Rather than worrying about navigating a dismal job market while still recovering from brain surgery — or, worse, standing in an unemployment line — Jordan knew she could turn to a local staffing firm to find temp work.

"I feel safe knowing Banner Personnel's my back-up. They've been a godsend," the Bolingbrook resident said. "I really don't worry about where my next paycheck is coming from because they've always snagged me something in a timely fashion."

Banner, which has offices in Downers Grove, Naperville and several other area locations, has successfully placed Jordan in a number of well-paying positions over the past few years. This time was no different. Jordan's Banner recruiter negotiated a lighter 20-hour week for her at Business Computer Design Inc. in Hinsdale, where she handles accounts receivable and has begun technical support training, until she's 100 percent.

Jordan isn't the only struggling suburbanite who has discovered the benefits of applying to temp agencies. More and more, job candidates are relying on matching institutions to acquire some sort of occupation — especially given the massive rounds of layoffs and bleak economic climate of late.

Employco Group, a Westmont-based human resources outsourcing firm that works with more than 400 small to mid-sized companies across the country, has noticed this trend. According to President Robert Wilson, the number of part-time and temporary candidates has risen 27 percent since last year. And there has been a dramatic increase in part-time hiring from the temp division — up 40 percent from last year.

"This shift is occurring in spite of the downturn," said Wilson, who deals with companies in 40 states. "Across most industries, new hiring has come to a screeching halt as bottom lines are being scrutinized, so work is being outsourced to temps as the financial landscape continues to deteriorate."

Laura Long, vice president at Banner, is witnessing the same phenomenon.

"People are so freaked out about the state of the economy that they're more willing to consider temporary work as a viable option, so it has become a more appealing alternative," she said. "We've definitely had a significant influx of candidates. The growing pool is great for companies, who are lucky enough to take their pick of sharp, experienced workers."

Historically, a spike in temp hiring indicates that businesses are preparing to weather a recession, Wilson said.

"They can save money on employee benefit plans and just call in extra workers for a brief time when they get a shipment rather than keeping their staff at full capacity," he added.

“That allows companies to micromanage their finances more and be more conservative, because they’re just waiting for the other shoe to drop with the bank mess and businesses folding.”

According to the Illinois Department of Employment Security, the statewide jobless rate surged to 7.6 percent in December 2008, marking a big jump from 5.3 percent just a year prior and hitting its highest point in more than 15 years. In the past 12 months, the state has lost 100,700 jobs, and the total number of unemployed people has risen sharply to 505,300.

Christian Martinez, a 27-year-old Chicago resident, was laid off from a position as a cook at a nursing home in Downers Grove last winter. He saw a newspaper ad for Carlisle Staffing Ltd., a division of Employco, and was placed at Olympic Oil in Cicero as a temp but full-time line leader machine operator.

“I was worried about how I was going to pay my bills and help support my mom because I didn’t know if I could get another job right away,” Martinez said. “But they got me something within a week. I’m glad to have steady work until the economy calms down again, and I feel like I have security.”

According to Wilson, businesses often opt for more flexible temp agreements over full-time employee hires because of the ease of termination.

“It’s a way of test-driving an employee — of avoiding investing in a chosen candidate who might not turn out to be as good as advertised,” he said. “With temps, if the boss doesn’t like a given worker for whatever reason, they can just say ‘Send me someone new tomorrow’ without going through proper HR channels. Otherwise, they’re kind of stuck with whoever signs on with the company.”

On the flip side, while companies are trying workers on for size, managers have been known to offer temps full-time positions.

“They have that ability if they’re impressed with the work ethic or notice potential,” Wilson added. “We’re seeing that happen a lot.”

This scenario also can be beneficial to job candidates because they are able to get a feel for the environment and co-worker dynamic before accepting an employment offer, Long said.

“Anyone can be on their best behavior for an hour during an interview — and that goes for both parties,” she added. “But until that worker punches in for a more extended period of time, they won’t know if their superior is a jerk, and the superior won’t know whether that worker consistently arrives 15 minutes late or can stay on task. Everyone wins because you get the chance to make sure there’s a good fit without the pressure of blindly committing.”

That the temp set-up can pave the way for a more long-term relationship is a reassuring revelation for those who have hit a rough patch. Jordan has even convinced her oldest son, a recent University of Illinois graduate, to allow Banner recruiters to place him since he’s having difficulty finding something in his field.

“Going through these agencies is a great idea — especially since we’re talking about opportunities more comparable than a \$7-an-hour gig,” Jordan said. “People are scrambling for jobs, and your resume usually gets put in a stack of other just-as-qualified candidates. This is a way of getting your foot in the door and making ends meet in the meantime.”