

Employers on the hunt



MIKE SALSBUry/The Columbian

Maria Leach of Vancouver talks with Salem Hospital representatives Brittini Beers, left, and Ashlee Morgan about job opportunities at Wednesday's Pathways to Your Future career fair. With jobless rates at five-year lows, employers say it's harder to fill openings. Salem Hospital is looking for 170 new workers at all levels, Beers said.

Finding skilled workers tough as unemployment rate falls

By **COURTNEY SHERWOOD**
Columbian staff writer

From Salem, Ore., from Seattle and everywhere in between, a record number of recruiters vied for job seekers at the 19th annual Pathways to Your Future career fair Wednesday in Vancouver.

With unemployment at a five-year low, employers said they've got more openings than in the recent past and it's getting harder to find highly skilled hires.

Health care is growing at an annual rate of nearly 12 percent, triple the county's overall job growth rate. Also growing fast, according to state employment figures: finance and insurance, at 13 percent, and manufacturing, at 4.5 percent.

But despite worker shortages in

some fields, would-be job candidates were lined up outside the Vancouver Convention Center when the doors opened at 1 p.m. Clark College organizers of the fair predicted that at least as many as last year's 3,000 attendees would make it to the event by the time the doors closed.

"Chances are I'm going to get a job soon, but whether it will pay well I don't know," said John Ferreira, 47, of Vancouver, who handed out five résumés and considered himself a strong candidate for at least two high-tech jobs.

Ferreira was laid off from Hewlett-Packard in 2001, and since then has held temporary jobs. Now he's looking for stability.

Clark County's March jobless rate

Percentage of population unemployed



SOURCE: Washington Employment Security Department

The Columbian

Job fair:

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Private, public and military employers were represented in 80 booths throughout the convention center's main room. They sought, with varying degrees of success, computer programmers, insurance agents, nurses, carpenters, college instructors, police officers, tax collectors, soldiers and production workers.

"The range of openings available is broader than it's ever been," said Catharine Keane, a career information specialist at Clark College who helped

organize the fair, which has added 15 exhibitors each of the past two years.

This year, the fair moved to the convention center so that all of the employers could fit into a single large room, said Maxine Mitchell, chairwoman of the job fair and director of career and employment services at Clark College.

At the Red Lion Hotel at the Quay last year, exhibitors were spread between two rooms, and past fairs at the Westfield Vancouver mall and Clark College have faced challenges with space and atmosphere.

"It's much bigger this year, but there's still more room to move around," Mitchell said.

"You have to have experience to get hired, but it's hard to get experience in the first place."

Nushin Amoui
JOB SEEKER

Despite the suited crowds that jostled for recruiters' attention and the low buzz of anxious conversation, some exhibitors said they were frustrated with the résumés they collected.

"The caliber of job seekers has been down in the last year as the economy has been up," said

Wade Nebeker, assistant manager for American Family Insurance's Southwest Washington headquarters. Nebeker is looking for skilled support staff to work with new insurance agents.

Westport Shipyards, which is hiring manufacturing, carpentry, electrical and plumbing workers, is also having a harder time looking for qualified applicants, said Joy Waterhouse, human resources recruiter for the coastal Washington company.

Others were more upbeat.

"You have to go out and convince people that it's worth it to put their lives on the line, that it's still a noble profession," said Officer Andre Sinn, a recruiter for the Seattle Police Depart-

ment who is traveling across the Pacific Northwest looking for 60 police department hires. Job fairs like Pathways to Your Future make a big difference, he said.

New job information

Nushin Amoui, 18, who received state certification as a nursing assistant last week, said she found out about openings at Kaiser Permanente by visiting the company's booth.

"Kaiser has been hiring a lot, so I'll apply through their Web site later," she said, though she was worried about her prospects. "You have to have experience to get hired, but it's

hard to get experience in the first place."

Kaiser is looking for 200 new hires this year, said company representative Lynn Busby, who stayed busy answering questions for much of the day.

Less busy was James Scott, recruiting retention noncommissioned officer with the Oregon Air National Guard, whose eye contact many seemed to be avoiding.

"There's a stigma that some people have about the military," Scott said. But he still expected one or two potential recruits to come out of the day.

"This has been a great fair," he said. "Clark College has been beautiful to work with."