

Career fair attracts hundreds



Photos by VIVIAN JOHNSON for The Columbian

Becky Barrett, along with hundreds of others, talks with potential employers during the Career Information and Job Fair at the Hilton Vancouver Washington in downtown Vancouver on Thursday morning.

Anxious job seekers meet employers, attend workshops

By CAMI JONER
Columbian staff writer

Verne Pick of Vancouver left his engineering job at Hewlett-Packard four years ago and went into real estate sales.

When home sales slowed to a trickle, Pick let his real estate license lapse and enrolled in a Clark College engineering program to freshen up his skills. He has spent more than a year looking for work in the field, and Pick said he realizes his job prospects are slim.

"There's an awful lot of competition," said Pick, who was one among a sea of 700 job seekers who showed up at a Thursday morning job fair in downtown Vancouver.

The event came at a time of near-record unemployment in Clark County, as employers across the board have cut oper-



Catharine Keane talks to a large group of people waiting for the doors to open at the job fair Thursday morning.

ating costs and reduced staff. In March, the jobless rate climbed to 12.5 percent with an estimated 27,420 county residents unemployed and looking for work. That's up from 6.3 percent in March

2008. Construction, manufacturing, retail trade and auto dealerships all have cut payroll. County employment last month totaled 133,900, down 900 or 0.7 percent from the same month last year.

That's why up to 1,500 people were expected to show up through the day at the Pathways to Your Future Career Information and Job Fair Thursday. By 1 p.m., the event was drawing between 200 and 250 new faces per hour through the door at the Hilton Vancouver Washington convention center.

The job fair featured 39 booths manned by educators and employers in hiring mode, said Catharine Keane, a career information specialist at Clark College, an event sponsor.

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"Some of them are conducting on-the-spot interviews, some are hiring immediately and others are filling their applicant pool," she said.

Pick said his intent was to stand out among the sea of job hopefuls.

"The bottom line is, it's a company market right now," said Pick, who took a voluntary severance package from HP in 2005. At least half of the staff in his department were getting laid off.

He sold real estate until it became cost prohibitive to maintain his professional license.

"The fees involved were more than I made," said Pick, 50. He planned to play up his experience and background of a 20-year engineering career to compete for jobs in his field.

"But there is an awful lot of competition," he said.

Pick was not alone in the swarm of job seekers trying to get a foot in the door.

For example, Christine Israel, 27, of Vancouver said she was interested in training for a new health care job, perhaps as a nursing assistant or registered nurse.

"I'm really open to whatever doors open to me. I'm just hoping one opens soon," said Israel, formerly self-employed as a massage therapist and reflexologist.

She was seeing between 10 and 25 clients a week. Her massage customers gradually declined as the economy worsened with a national financial crisis, slowing retail sales and mounting job losses.

Israel said she feels lucky that she can seek training while supported by her husband, Matthew Israel, a full-time truck driver.

She would also like to find a full- or part-time job.

"The hard thing is, I know I'm not the only one out there looking for work," Israel said.



Job seekers were able to get tips on résumé-writing strategies at Thursday's Career Information and Job Fair at the Hilton Vancouver Washington in downtown Vancouver.

VIVIAN JOHNSON for The Columbian

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Verne Pick

UNEMPLOYED FORMER
HEWLETT-PACKARD
ENGINEER

The large pool of job seekers has benefits for employers, said Kris Greene, who manages two Vancouver offices for Country Financial.

Greene was at the job fair to recruit candidates for five open positions.

"We need representatives to market our products and financial services," said Greene. He added that only self-motivated individuals need apply.

His company is in perpetual hiring mode, said Greene, who interviews about 125 people a year.

Greene also sees drawbacks to the high number of local job hopefuls.

"We have to sift through a lot more résumés to find a candidate who will fit. But we are seeing more qualified people," he said.

For applicants, getting noticed can come down to a polished résumé and a good three-minute elevator speech, said Keane, the Clark College career specialist.

"Job seekers should be able to say in three minutes or less what they're interested in,

their qualifications and what makes them exceptional," she said.

The speech requires feedback and practice sessions, which were built into Thursday's job fair with mock interviews and workshops with real employers.

The sessions allowed participants to get feedback from people in the industry, critical in today's job market, Keane said.

"It's more crucial than ever to be polished at this time, especially when the economy is down," she said.

Perhaps Battle Ground resident Michael McGary got the message beforehand. McGary, 53, showed up at the job fair in pressed shirt and tie, a folder of printed résumés tucked under his arm.

It's been less than a month since he lost his job as general manager of a Portland restaurant that was shuttered on March 31.

McGary said he would be happy to find a similar job, but he's being realistic.

"It's not a good market to be looking for such jobs. The entire industry has been hit," he said.

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