

Out for 2 words: 'You're hired'

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WESTFORD -- Ellen Neacy's fight for survival begins anew every Wednesday afternoon, upon hurrying from her car and following several suits and heels into J.V. Fletcher Library.

Dressing appropriately -- even if it's just for the weekly job-seekers workshop -- is second nature to Neacy, a litigation paralegal from Groton. From taking public-speaking classes to earning a certificate for a popular computer software suite, she has polished her skills in so many ways as suggested by the staff at a career center since being laid off 17 months ago.

"Anything they asked me to do, I've done -- and then some," Neacy said.

Yet, she hasn't found the permanent job she so desperately needs.

With the economy making a steady recovery, many regulars at Westford Job Seekers Network have found work. The workshop series the town library started in July 2009 used to draw as many as 60 people, according to Dina Kanabar, head of systems and technical services at the library.

Now, it's about 20. But for Kanabar, that's still 20 too many.

Despite growth in the job market, there remains a definite need for Westford Job Seekers Network -- which provide workshops on a range of topics from interview skills to effective résumé writing -- and similar programs around the region, Kanabar said. She and volunteers for the program are trying to help those in long-term unemployment finally find light at the end of the tunnel.

Companies across Massachusetts are hiring at a higher rate this year than in the last few, according to job market watchers. In June, the state's unemployment rate was 5.5 percent, its lowest in nearly six years. As recently as November, the state unemployment rate hit 7.1 percent, surpassing the national average.

The unemployment rate for Greater Lowell -- including Lowell, Billerica, Chelmsford, Westford, Dracut, Tyngsboro, Tewksbury and Dracut -- has also significantly improved. The rate in June was 5.7 percent, 1.8 percent lower than last June, according to Barbara O'Neil, executive director of Career Center of Lowell. There were 8,623 unemployed people in June across the region, compared to 11,300 a year earlier.

Former Career Center clients from the region reported an average wage of \$23.09 for July 2013 through June 2014, compared to \$21.87 during the same period a year earlier.

Staffing agencies are feeling the difference firsthand.

"We are having a record year," said Mike Epsztein, owner of Express Employment Professionals, which has offices in Chelmsford and Nashua, of the demand to fill permanent, contract and temporary positions. "Even last week was a record week. (The level of demand) is something we haven't seen in four years."

Information technology is particularly hot, said Trish Bromme, executive vice president of Hollister Staffing, a Boston-based staffing firm that handles permanent, contract and temp jobs. "We can't even handle all the openings."

Bromme and Epsztein began noticing an uptick in hiring around the turn of the year. Job openings have steadily increased across the board since then, they said.

Bromme said hiring has been strong in all sectors that Hollister handles, including accounting, finance and office administration. Engineers are also in high demand but manufacturing is particularly strong, Epsztein said.

That does not feel real to some job seekers, however. While things are turning around for some, others still struggle from long-term unemployment, O'Neil said.

Michael Chase, an events manager from Bradford who specializes in executive briefings and customer meetings, said he knows companies often advertise positions despite their plan to fill them with internal candidates anyway. And Joyce Plante of Clinton, who is part of the Westford Job Seekers Network, said she hasn't found a job in the defense industry for the same reason for which she was laid off: federal defense budget cuts.

Some jobs they do find may not pay as much, Neacy said. A position for which she interviewed recently would pay what she earned 10 years ago.

Many job seekers said employers are looking for specific skill sets -- so much so that the chance of getting a job is next to none if they lack one of many desired attributes or experiences. It appears employers are "extremely fearful" of making a wrong hiring decision, said Simon Hawes, an inside sales professional from Groton.

Bromme said many employers do look for workers with particular skills and are struggling to find a perfect match. These days, those who possess high-in-demand skills receive not one but multiple offers, she said. Such "skill gaps" are often seen in the IT industry, according to O'Neil. Those who are 55 and older tend to have more difficulty finding jobs, O'Neil said.

Meanwhile, the struggles continue for long-term job seekers, including those who participate in the Westford Job Seekers Network. To maintain his public speaking and other skills, Chase serves on the Westford Job Seekers Network management team

and facilitates workshops. Neacy is expanding her job search to beyond Greater Boston and into the pharmaceutical industry.

They just keep pushing on.

Follow Hiroko Sato on Twitter and Tour @SatoLowellSun.

Where they're finding jobs

Industry sectors reporting the most hires for Career Center of Lowell clients:

1. Professional/scientific/technology
2. Administrative support
3. Health care
4. Manufacturing
5. Construction
6. Unspecified
7. Accommodations/food service
8. Education services

Caption: [Photo: Laurel Haug of Lowell, left, an administrative assistant, Joyce Plante of Clinton, a software engineer, and guest speaker Michael Taylor lead a workshop on public speaking during a meeting of the Westford Job Seekers Network at the J.V. Fletcher Library Wednesday. The outlook is improving for those looking for work. See a video at \[lowellsun.com\]\(#\). SUN / JULIA MALAKIE](#)

[Sun staff photos can be ordered by visiting our SmugMug site. Photo: Guest speaker Michael Taylor, left, and group facilitator Mike Chase lead a workshop on public speaking during a meeting of the Westford Job Seekers Network at the J.V. Fletcher Library Wednesday. See a video at \[lowellsun.com\]\(#\).](#)

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