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Who's Hiring

'The jobs are out there'

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When students and recent graduates go to **Jamie Belinne's** office, they don't want the latest quarterly growth reports or monthly unemployment figures. And they don't want market forecasts from Wall Street sages. They want to know where they can get hired.

Belinne, assistant dean of career services at the [University of Houston's](#) C.T. Bauer College of Business, is responsible for ensuring the business leaders of tomorrow can land a job today — or at least at some point in the foreseeable future. And, according to the college's internal placement numbers, that is still a reasonable expectation as long as job seekers are patient.

"It's still tight out there, but we're finding that people who are working hard at the job search are still getting multiple offers," Belinne says. "It's taking a little longer to get there, but the jobs are out there."

HOT INDUSTRIES

Staffing services, executive search firms and job counselors are quick to identify where on Houston's economic map to find opportunities, and they all point to a location that should surprise no one: the oil and gas sector.

"Oil and gas exploration is really doing well and there are a lot of resource plays still being developed," says **Ken McQueen**, a recruiter with Houston-based executive search firm [Richard, Wayne & Roberts](#). "We can't find enough highly skilled people who have exploration and production experience."

McQueen says his firm typically has about 100 to 150 active searches at any one time, but the current count is above 250. In addition to production and exploration, he says, land specialists, such as lease analysts, are in high demand, as are contract writers and supply-chain managers.

Sue Burnett, president of Houston-based [Burnett Staffing Specialists](#), agrees that the oil and gas sector is the most fertile local job-hunting ground, but she says engineering services, health care and professional services are also hot. Burnett says that hiring began to pick up in January and February and has remained strong since.

"Things are definitely way up from last year, though actually 2009 wasn't nearly as bad as I had expected," Burnett says. "The law firms really took a hit and made major cutbacks, but they're starting to hire again. Anything retail-oriented is still struggling, and some manufacturing sectors are hurting. But overall we're bullish on 2010 and especially 2011."

THE LOCAL PICTURE

Federal statistics indicate the wider Houston job market is still sluggish compared with its pre-crisis heyday, but this year has seen some modest improvement. The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) estimates that total nonfarm unemployment in Houston was about 8.2 percent in September, lower than the high of 8.8 percent earlier this year but a far cry from the 4 percent rate recorded in September 2007 or the 5.2 percent rate of September 2008.

The roughly 2.9 million work force in Houston can at least take comfort in having it easier than the rest of the country, as the September unemployment rate for the United States was 9.6 percent.

Eric Neilsen, managing director of executive search firm [Korn/Ferry International's](#) Houston office, says the job market is better than those numbers might suggest.

"In a tough climate you see a lot of restructuring and turnaround and work-outs, and that's not good for general employment," Neilsen says. "But, generally speaking, we are in a growth period. We're doing a lot of finance-related projects, and more heads of corporate development and head of (mergers and acquisitions)

than we have done in the last three years combined.”

Slow and steady wins the race

And, as Belinne tells her alumni at the Bauer College, the best way to take advantage of that growth is to prepare for a marathon, not a sprint.

“The same stuff that’s always worked is still working — if you keep at it,” Belinne says. “So many jobs are filled before they’re posted. You have to be patient. You can’t give up too quickly. You’re now going to get more rejection before you get a ‘yes’, so you have to stay at it.”

In the meantime, she has suggestions for adding skills and building a resume even while not working.

“While you’re looking, you may want to consider doing something of value, whether it’s volunteering or professional development,” she says. “You don’t want your resume to say, ‘I’m unemployed, so I’ve been sitting in my chair twiddling my thumbs.’ ”

ALL ABOUT TIMING Follow-up efforts after personal and telephone interviews need to be proactive and assertive without becoming irritating, according to OI Partners – The Innis Co. in Houston. But this can be a delicate balance. “The period between the final interviews and hiring is an opportunity for candidates to actively influence decisions. It’s important to understand the decision process and timing so you can build an outreach plan,” says John Alston, the company’s managing partner. Following is a timeline with some of his recommendations:

- During the interview. Establish what the next step will be, and when and how it would be appropriate for you to follow up — by phone, if possible.
- Immediately afterward. It’s critical to send a follow-up note, or letter, or e-mail, within 24 hours of the interview — and to each person you saw who may have a vote in the hiring decision.
- Within five days. Find a reason to reach out to the hiring person and other key participants in the decision process. Send them a link to an interesting article that relates to business challenges and work projects discussed during the interview process. The idea is to reinforce the potential value you will bring as part of the team. Follow up by phone: A well-placed follow-up telephone call to the hiring manager and human resources person within five days to reaffirm continuing interest is vital. If they say they are still interviewing, determine when it would be appropriate to call back.
- After one week. After seven to 10 days, send an e-mail demonstrating your continued interest in the position. Use a rotating cycle strategy: Keep in touch with the company on an ongoing cycle, every seven to 12 days or so. Each follow-up communication must be personalized to the topic of what was discussed with that particular person. Do not send form letters, or the same letter to each person.
- Four to six weeks afterward. After four to six weeks, companies figure that most finalists will just assume they have hired someone else, Alston says. “People who are most persistent in following up are demonstrating leadership, and that is one reason they finally get offers. Following up does not mean merely calling and asking where a company is in its decision-making process. Instead, people should utilize a variety of touch-base approaches.”