

The Sunday Times, pg 12 5 July 2009

Number of chronic jobless people doubles to 16,600

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Try as they may, they just cannot seem to land a job.

The latest job market figures for the January to March period, released by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) on June 15, showed that there are now 16,600 long-term unemployed people in Singapore.

By definition, these people have been jobless for 25 weeks or more.

A year ago, the corresponding figure was less than half - 7,500.

In the first five months of this year, the CareerLink Plus Centre has seen 542 long-term unemployed and low-wage workers approaching it for help, compared to 1,293 cases for the whole of last year. The centre is a joint project between the Workforce Development Agency and self-help groups like the Chinese Development Assistance Council, the Singapore Indian Development Association, the Eurasian Association and the Association for Muslim Professionals. It is spearheaded by Mendaki.

Labour MP Halimah Yacob said: "The economic crisis is not the only factor although it makes it harder for the unemployed to find jobs.

"The issue is one of structural unemployment too as many also do not have the skills to do the jobs that are available."

Madam Halimah, an MP for Jurong GRC, has seen more of the chronic jobless in her constituency seeking help since the downturn.

Help is given with regard to technical and computer skills, and softer skills like preparing resumes and presenting themselves well at job interviews.

This chronic jobless group mainly comprises mature workers aged above 40, housewives in their 40s and 50s who want to go back to work, and people with physical disabilities, medical conditions or past criminal records.

In this group too are choosy job seekers, said Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of corporate services for The GMP Group, a recruitment firm.

Optimistic

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MR TAN GIM LEONG, a job seeker

“Job seekers should temper their job expectations, such as pay packages and employee benefits, in line with the current economic situation.”

The question arises: How long can one stay unemployed before it starts to look bad on one’s resume?

Mr Paul Heng of Next Career Consulting Group feels that a layoff of three months to four months is the average during regular times, but this can hit six months in a downturn.

Given the current bleak market, bosses will likely be more understanding of one’s jobless stint, said Mr Dhirendra Shantilal, senior vice-president for Asia-Pacific of human resource firm Kelly Services.

“But job seekers will have to demonstrate that they had used the time productively, to gain new skills from relevant courses or even taken on temporary work and other activities to keep in touch with the market dynamics,” he said.

Mr Heng gave this advice: list the serious job applications sent out, the responses received, the interview opportunities, and the offers received.

All these will help to convince a prospective employer, he explained.

And there are government-sponsored training programmes too, giving those who are unemployed little justification for sitting idle.

For example, the \$650 million Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience (Spur), launched last November, encourages Singaporeans to upgrade their skills through subsidised training courses.

“You have to take things as they come,” said one job seeker, Mr Tan Gim Leong. The 42-year-old former engineer had been unemployed since December 2007 but took up a six-month contract teaching position in a secondary school last July.

He then attended an Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment course at the Institute for Adult Learning. He hopes to become a corporate trainer with its completion last week.

“Because I am doing a career switch, there definitely will be some gaps. But this can all be explained in interviews,” he said.

Have you been jobless for more than 25 weeks? Share your experience by e-mailing suntimes@sph.com.sg