

Quick recovery last year for job market

Number of vacancies shot up to 34,900 in the third quarter

BY SUE-ANN CHIA

SENIOR POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

THE job market made a swift recovery between June and September last year, mirroring the economy's turnaround by recording a sharp rise in job vacancies.

After a dismal first-half outlook last year, vacancies rose from 24,500 in June to 34,900 in September.

Sales and service workers were most in demand – the result of new malls opening, and ahead of the two integrated resorts starting operations.

These and other details were contained in the Manpower Ministry's Jobs Vacancy Report 2009 released yesterday.

The report also noted that almost three in 10 job openings in some sectors were not filled for at least six months.

These tended to be lower-skilled positions such as security guards, sales assistants, waiters and construction labourers.

For executives, the largest proportion of unfilled jobs was for computer engineers, network and computer systems administrators, and mechanical engineering technicians.

Even though the number of jobs going a-begging was similar to levels in 2008, analysts said it could signal problems that need sorting out.

Jobs were plentiful in 2008, hence it was no surprise that many positions were vacant for months. But when the economic crisis last year led to a job crunch and a greater number of unemployed, people were expected to snap up jobs when these became available.

Not all did so. Analysts said this could reflect a mismatch between the type of jobs available and the skill levels or expectations of job seekers.

Mr Josh Goh, assistant director of corporate services at recruitment firm The GMP Group, said some laid-off executives had no intention of downgrading to a job in the service sector and still looked

for similar white-collar jobs.

The other reason for the mismatch: fewer people with the right skills to fill the surge in vacancies.

Said labour MP Halimah Yacob: "If these jobs offer low pay, it will be more difficult to attract people."

Relating a conversation she had with a cleaner whose salary went up by only \$50 in five years to \$750, she said: "We must do something to motivate them to do better, so we can pay them better."

The jobs mismatch is also evident from other figures in MOM's annual report.

As Singapore's labour force becomes better educated, analysts said there should have been more – not fewer – vacancies for higher-skilled workers.

Instead, the proportion of vacancies for professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) fell from 48 per cent in 2008 to 44 per cent last year.

This was due to a growing number of jobs which required lower qualifications, while the number of white-collar positions shrank.

For instance, vacancies for sales and service workers chalked up the highest rise last year – up by 1,200 vacancies to 7,260. But openings for professionals dipped the most: down by 1,240 vacancies to 6,240.

The drop in PMET openings explains why degree holders, in particular, were hardest hit in last year's downturn, as more stayed jobless for longer.

Another trend was the shift towards the growing service sector, which generated three in four of the job vacancies.

Demand was led by community, social and personal services, which saw more than 2,000 openings for teaching professionals, and wholesale trade services, which needed more than 1,000 shop assistants.

sueann@sph.com.sg

■ OCCUPATIONS WITH MOST VACANCIES

PROFESSIONALS, MANAGERS, EXECUTIVES AND TECHNICIANS (PMETs)

Job	Vacancies	Median salary	Vacancies unfilled for at least six months (%)	Minimum qualification
Teaching professional	2,760	\$6,644	1.1	Polytechnic diploma
Management executive	420	\$3,000	13.7	Degree and above
Sales and marketing executive	390	\$2,950	26.6	Degree and above
Software engineer	330	\$4,143	24.1	Degree and above
Professional nurse	240	\$2,643	10.3	Polytechnic diploma

CLERICAL, SALES AND SERVICE WORKERS

Private security guard	1,390	\$1,379	55.6	Lower secondary
Sales assistant	1,320	\$1,630	52.1	Secondary
Waiter	1,190	\$1,200	51.1	Primary or lower
Administrative clerk	850	\$1,900	25	Secondary
Receptionist and information clerk	580	\$1,871	20.1	Secondary

PRODUCTION AND TRANSPORT OPERATORS, CLEANERS AND LABOURERS

Construction labourer	940	\$800	44.4	Primary or lower
Electronic equipment/component assembler	530	\$1,403	27.4	Lower secondary
Welder	390	\$2,270	29.6	Lower secondary
Pipe fitter	350	\$1,000	11.3	Secondary
Material and freight handling worker	340	\$1,577	37.6	Primary or lower

Source: MINISTRY OF MANPOWER