Going the extra mile for job seekers

Career centres are bustling with activity as the total number of job seekers hit 6,378 in December. This is up from 5,238 in November, according to official statistics released last week.

With unemployment hitting an estimated 2.6 per cent in the last quarter of 2008, and the likelihood of more retrenchments to come, Melissa Sim and Amelia Tan find out how groups, schools and communities are pulling out all the stops to help the jobless.

Online help from peers

RETRENCHED workers and job seekers are coming together online to share tips on finding jobs, career advice and job openings.

Last month, job website JobsCentral introduced a forum for users to post information on job vacancies and jobs that are retrenching or rumoured to be retrenching. They discuss topics such as whether their retrenchment package is fair, how to cope with being retrenched and alert others if they know of job openings.

Users are also using the forum on other job website JobStreet, to share tips on finding employment in the recession.

Last year, St John also rolled out a Just Ask section for job seekers to ask each other questions and offer job advice.

With so much talk of retrenchment on the streets, “we thought it would be a good service to provide to our users with a comprehensive and centralised location to read about which companies are retrenching or are rumoured to be retrenching”, said JobsCentral CEO Lim Der Shing.

It is especially helpful for retrenched workers to get a voice and a friendly face to talk about their fears, clarify doubts and also to help others who are retrenched feel less alone.

Job seekers welcome such services.

Said Nanyang Technological University final-year business student Ong Jin Jing, 22, “Jobs Central websites are updated all the time and help us to know in detail about what jobs are available. I will be visiting the websites regularly and will send out as many applications as possible.”

Helping students via SMS alerts and internships

WITH many multinational corporations putting the brakes on hiring this year, the Nanyang Technological University has set its sights on government agencies and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to hire its graduates.

Over the past few months, the university’s career services officers have been cultivating ministries and SMEs to participate in NTU career fairs and recruitment talks.

Their efforts appear to have paid off. Out of the 107 organisations at NTU’s two-day career fair which ended last Thursday, 28 per cent were from the public sector – double the number last year.

Some of the government agencies which participated included the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore, Defence Science & Technology Agency (DSTA) and Ministry of Education.

NTU career and attachment officer director Loh Pui Wah said it took work to “track down” new partners but the university was willing to put in the effort for the sake of its students.

In previous years, NTU used to rely on mass recruitment drives by MNCs and banks to hire a majority of its graduates.

About 3,000 graduates emerge from NTU each year. Last May, The Straits Times reported that 90 per cent of NTU students who graduated in 2007 got jobs within a month of graduating.

Mr Loh said recruitment by SMEs from growing sectors such as shipyard maintenance, chemical manufacturing and gaming can potentially make up for the hiring freezes by multinationals.

Mr Loh said: “The SMEs offer one or two positions but when you add all of this up, the numbers can be quite sizeable.”

NTU also introduced a new SMS service last month to alert students of job openings. Graduating students who fit the requirements of companies will receive SMS alerts informing them of new job opportunities.

It is looking at setting up a portal for students to upload their resumes for employers to view. It will be opening more venues on campus for career counselling to help students manage job expectations.

Mr Loh said that NTU is confident that these efforts will allow 80 to 80 per cent of its graduates to get a job offer by the time they graduate in July.

Other educational institutions are also doing their bit to get their students jobs.

The Singapore Management University and National University of Singapore are arranging a series of recruitment and internship events in the next few weeks.

Singapore Polytechnic is going further by offering short term or contract jobs on campus to some students who will be graduating in May.

The students can be engaged in work such as estate management and maintenance, creating multimedia applications or assisting lecturers in research projects.

Having these opportunities to find jobs is comforting for graduating students.

NTU electronic and electrical engineering final-year student Jason Toow, 25, was armed with 10 copies of his resume when he attended NTU’s career fair.

He said: “I used to think that I only want to work in the semi-conductor industry. Now I am open for jobs in any engineering company. Hopefully, I will get an offer.”

Self-help groups add staff to cope with increased enquiries

A SURGE in the number of job seekers has had two community self-help groups – Mendaki and Sinda – beefing up their staff to cope with the number of new cases.

Mendaki Sense, the social enterprise wing of the Malay language group Mendaki, saw one of its highest jumps in job seekers when numbers quadrupled from the month of November to nearly 550 cases last December. About 10 per cent were newly retrenched workers.

To cope with the rise, the three core case management officers will be employed, bringing the total to 17. Their responsibilities include counselling workers, finding job matches and tracking workers’ progress in their new jobs.

The Career Development and Resource Centre run by the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda), plans to hire two more officers, bringing the total to four. A spokesman for Sinda said there are many things to handle, from facilitating interviews to matching with course developers and dealing with “walk-ins”.

Sinda received 290 job enquiries last month, up from just 50 in November. As in the case of Mendaki, many were middle-aged, semi-skilled workers who had been laid off. Sinda helped 75 per cent of these find employment or job offers to attend, and found training courses for near 85 per cent to retool their skills.

One such job seeker, Madam Subbaraj Vidiy, 26, went through a three-day programme to build her confidence and learn interview skills. The permanent resident from India, who used to teach in a secondary school, has found it difficult to get a job in education despite sending out over 400 letters of application since last May.

Mrs V. Balan, who approached Sinda for help last Friday, has been jobless for seven months after being asked to resign as a school laboratory assistant, and is now “willing to accept anything”.

Sinda’s Family Service Centre will also extend its operating hours to take on more consultations with families in need. It will stay open till 9pm, instead of 6pm, on Mondays and Thursdays.

Job seekers can also approach the centre, which will then refer them to the CDCS. “We need to beef up the numbers so that there is sufficient support,” said a spokesman from Sinda.

Both the Chinese Development Assistance Council and The Eurasian Association said they are still able to handle the number of job seekers coming to them.

CDCS add on recruitment drives to aid jobless PMETs

THERE will be a continuous stream of job fairs and recruitment drives this year, as Community Development Councils (CDCs) try to match unemployed residents with prospective employers.

North West CDC is offering four job fairs this year, each involving over 30 employers offering a total of 1,000 jobs.

An unusual addition will be a job fair for professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs), a group which normally needs help from the CDCs.

The emphasis in the June fair will be on the Professional Conversion Programme, which helps PMETs upgrade their skills or start new careers in growth sectors.

Last month, the North East CDC also launched its North East Head Hunters Programme, creating opportunities for professionals, managers and executives to meet representatives from headhunting firms.

Headhunters interviewed candidates for suitable vacancies, providing another avenue to secure new jobs.

Through this programme, North East CDC aims to provide 500 jobs in the next six months.

Another CDC has extended its working hours to cater to job seekers.

“The most important thing is to ensure that timely assistance is given to those affected,” he added. siminoh@spoh.com.sg

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