

Working below capacity

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Neale Schiffman bakes a mean loaf of bread. After eight years as a baker for Great Harvest Bread Company in South Ogden, he can mix, knead, and bake specialty breads like Spinach Feta and Parmesan Sourdough in his sleep.

"The job is kind of addictive," Schiffman said, "when you're a baker you start something and you see the end product the same day. It's like 'hey, I did something and followed it all the way to the end and it turned out good, so I'm happy.'"

Schiffman admits that although his job does keep bread on the table, he feels that he is wasting his bachelor's degree in English and working below his capacity.

"Most of the time, no, I'm not satisfied with my job. The pay isn't that great and it gets repetitive. I stay because I haven't found anything better," Schiffman said. "I applied for franchise jobs twice but the jobs went to people connected to people already working there, so that was frustrating. I probably wouldn't apply again."

Desiring a career with better financial compensation and health benefits, Schiffman ultimately did leave Great Harvest Bread Co. to pursue a logistics job for a contractor at Hill Air Force Base (HAFB) in Ogden.

"I didn't feel that I was accomplishing anything or going anywhere. I never felt satisfied," Schiffman said of his job at HAFB. "I wasn't allowed to fix any of the problems. The

attitude was to just do the bare minimum while you look for a government job and then you are set up for life."

After eight months Schiffman quit the logistics job. When the career fairs that he attended turned up nothing, he returned to Great Harvest Bread Co. discouraged.

Schiffman is not alone. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor, in addition to the seven million unemployed Americans this month are an additional 1.4 million not counted because they didn't search for work last month. Over 300,000 of that 1.4 million are classified as "discouraged workers" because when surveyed they reported that they have stopped looking for work because they believe that there are no jobs available to them.

Many of these Americans survive through social programs like welfare or the charity of others, and the rest join the anonymous ranks of the underemployed working below their level of skill, experience and education.

Although technically employed, according to Jim Robson, an Economist with the Utah Department of Workforce Services, this underutilization of labor constitutes a loss to the economy that is difficult to measure.

"A lot of times people feel like they are not being fully utilized or that they aren't being employed in an area for which they thought they were trained, so that makes it difficult to define when someone is underemployed," Robson said.

In the absence of a standard set of criteria to quantify underemployment in monthly household surveys, no official government statistics are available on the total number of people underemployed in the U.S.

In a survey done by CollegeGrad.com, a popular entry level job site, 18 percent of recent college graduates actively seeking employment in their field said that they consider themselves underemployed.

Schiffman said that when he graduated from college with a degree in English in 2002 he initially never worried about finding a job.

"I didn't know what to look for," Schiffman said. "People want some set of experience, they want to see something you've done but if you are straight out of college, especially if you've been working full-time in college, chances are you don't have that resume built up."

Schiffman feels that the university academic departments could do more to prepare students for the real world. "Every major you choose should have a course where they bring in people from different facets of your field from the entry-level guy to the CEO to show you what you will be doing with your major and what to expect" Schiffman said. "They don't want to do that because they are afraid that they will scare people away [from certain majors]."

According to Kenneth Gray, a professor of Workforce Education and Development at Penn State, a recent U.S. study shows that 43 percent of recent four-year college graduates self-reported that they held jobs that did not require advanced degrees.

Underemployment for graduates with technical degrees in areas like engineering and computer science was 20 percent and jumped to 50 percent for graduates with social science degrees.

Unfortunately underemployment doesn't just affect recent graduates. Thirty years of work experience in software development and ten years as a Senior Software Engineer didn't protect Sidney Cragun and 200 other senior employees at Novell

from being laid off recently. Seven months, two job placement seminars and 15 interviews later, Cragun says that he can count on one hand the job listings in his field outside of web page development.

"What employers are looking for is direct software development experience," Cragun said. "What I am hearing back is that there are applicants that are better qualified."

According to Robson, unqualified applicants are the biggest complaint that he hears regularly from employers who are hiring.

"Employers are saying that they are having a difficult time finding qualified workers for the positions that they are trying to fill," Robson said. His advice to individuals who think that they are underemployed is, "You just have to keep networking and looking around trying to develop opportunities for yourself."

Cragun agrees that there are jobs out there but says the tricky part is matching up experience with vacancies. Although he has 30 years of experience as a software engineer, Cragun does not have a background in web page development where the majority of job opening currently are.

"It is a difficult situation, a real Catch 22," Cragun said. "Employers don't want to hire you without experience, but you can't get experience if they don't give you an opportunity."

Job seekers like Cragun also say that the ever-changing nature of technology makes even the skills of recent graduates obsolete within months after they join the job force.

"Unfortunately most people are stuck in jobs that aren't enhancing their employment marketability at all," Cragun said. "The mistake I made was that I became very specialized and didn't

keep up with where the industry was going. Novell's policy is that you are responsible for your own career development."

Cragun said that he found it very difficult to stay abreast of the latest technology while juggling full-time employment, working a typical ten hour day at Novell and commuting two and a half hours from Davis to Utah County.

"My job was just so time consuming I found it very difficult to keep up with what was happening in the industry," Cragun said. "There are an awful lot of engineers that are in the same boat that I am."

Unemployed, Cragun now has plenty of time to devote to additional training as he spends his days at the Davis Area Technical College learning web development.

"I am frustrated," Cragun said. "When I first got laid off I expected that a new employer would see the valuable contributions that I have made over the last 30 years and realize that although I may not have the exact skill set that they are looking for, I could quickly get up to speed and make a significant contribution."

In his mid-50s, Cragun said that he would prefer to stay in the profession that he has worked in for 30 years as retiring is not an option for him and the his family of seven.

"I don't have a pension," Cragun said. "I have some in a 401k but not to a point that I could support myself. I think for a lot of people working until they are 65 is a necessity."

Cragun said that his mistake was in assuming that his years of hard work and loyalty at Novell would guarantee him job security.

"I really have never had to look for a job in 30 years and I have been pretty well compensated," Cragun said. "You don't put your age on job applications but employers can look at your resume and do the math; they know they are going to have to pay you more money so they hire the young guys because they know that they can pay them less and drive them harder."

For Jodie Buttars, owner and manager of four Subway franchises, underemployment is good for business. According to Buttars, although her employees earn just over minimum wage--\$5.20 to \$7.00 an hour--her restaurants are no longer solely staffed by high school students looking for a part-time job to put gas in their car.

"I think it is hard to find a job," Buttars said. "I have a lot of people tell me that they have put in applications everywhere, and I have been the only one to call them. Maybe it is because they just aren't qualified for the jobs they are looking for, but even in fast food they say 'you are the only one that's ever called me.'"

Buttars estimates that 10 percent of her workforce are college students and college graduates or professionals working a second job to pay the bills.

"They make the best employees because they are dedicated, hardworking, and dependable," Buttars said. "A lot of them have the skills to find a better job out there, I don't know why it is so hard for them to find a job, but it seems to be."

According to Buttars, it takes the average college graduate six months to find a job and start their career before they leave Subway.

"I know quite a few that after they graduated moved out of state because there wasn't anything around here within their field,"

Buttars said. "A lot of them said it was a lot easier to find a job in another state."

Although the job outlook in the U.S. is improving with unemployment at 4.6 percent down from 5.1 percent at this same time last year, Robson concedes that ease in finding a job depends on the field you are looking in.

"I think that for some there just isn't enough demand in the field that they are looking for or the jobs just aren't out there for the profession they are looking at," Buttars said.

Robson said that with unemployment at just 3.5 percent in Utah, now is a great time to find a job in the beehive state, especially if you want to work with your hands or in professional and business services.

"All the major industries in Utah are growing," Robson said. "The real strong area is construction, which is driving the economy right now."

Buttars also feels that some of her employees could do more to improve their financial situations.

"I think that some of them give up too easy and just don't try hard enough," Buttars said. "I guess it is just easier to keep working at Subway."

Schiffman concedes that he is ultimately responsible for his current situation.

"It's my fault just as much as anything," Schiffman said. "I needed money so I went back to Great Harvest and now I've just settled in. I think that I could have been more aggressive [in my job search]. Whether it would have worked out, I don't know."

If he could do it over again, Schiffman said that one of the things that he would do differently would be to pursue a degree in psychology because it is more marketable than an English degree.

"I'd be more aggressive about a job search by being more proactive about it," Schiffman said. "At the time I just thought about the here and now. I thought, 'I can't afford to think about the future, it's too hard to plan ahead when paying for the next semester's tuition'—that was my future."

Schiffman said that his plans for the coming years don't include Great Harvest., unless he was to open his own bakery.

"In the future, I want to be at a job that I'm happy at [and]that is not tedious to go to every day. I am trying not to make the mistake again of leaving this job and taking another job just because it's different," Schiffman said. "I did that before and I hated it. I got some experience but I don't think that it was worth it."

According to Robson it is important to keep working while you are searching for a better job to avoid the pitfalls of depression that often follow prolonged unemployment or underemployment.

"It's important to work, to have jobs to create a history of employment and to gain work experience," Robson said. "We have really a tight labor market and a lot more opportunities out there. Now is the time if you feel like you're not in your dream job to maybe look at those jobs and see if you can't find a firm that's hiring and apply for some of their jobs."

Robson also suggests using this time to get the additional education that employers are looking for, a suggestion that Cragun is taking action on by studying for his JAVA and Microsoft certifications.

"Based on what's happened with my job search, I've either got to change careers or start spending full-time pursuing these certifications," Cragun said. "I don't see a lot of alternatives."

In Schiffman's case, he doesn't see additional schooling as the solution to his underemployment.

"I think the Generation X solution is if things aren't working out, go back to school. I don't know if I want to do that again," Schiffman said. "It's cost prohibitive and it didn't really pay off the first time."

Schiffman plans to continue searching for better employment, preferably in the field of journalism where he could use his degree and writing skills to produce daily articles, allowing him to feel the same sense of accomplishment he enjoys at the bakery by simply substituting columns for loaves.

"I'd like to be active, doing something where I could see the result, the fruits of my labor," Schiffman said. "Not necessarily production, but if I wrote something and could see it or produce something, that would be the ideal job for me."

Schiffman said that although he is underemployed working at Great Harvest Bread Co., he prefers production work to collecting an unemployment check and hopes that a future employer will rank work ethic above experience and give him an opportunity to prove himself.

"I think that all I need is a chance. I think that is all that a lot of people need," Schiffman said. "I can't talk myself into a job, I need to prove myself. Once you get in a job you can't talk your way out of the work."

