

High unemployment rates are impacting HR operations



With an unemployment rate of 3.6 percent in January 2020, HR departments started this year spending much of their time searching for talent to fill available roles. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit weeks later and unemployment rates jumped to double digits, this scenario quickly changed.

“We currently have two open positions that we are advertising for, and we have had almost 10 times the number of applicants we would expect to have for each,” says Ethan Taub, CEO of [Loanry](#).

Similarly, [TeamBuilding](#) CEO Michael Alexis reports, “We've seen a massive influx of applicants for our job openings, which I would estimate at least 2-3x pre-COVID numbers. Notably, the average applicant is also much better qualified than we have seen in the past. I believe the reason for this high quality of available people is that so many are out of work due to circumstances that were truly out of their control.”

An expanded applicant pool does not always translate into a better one, though. People desperate for employment often apply to anything and everything for which they believe they might stand a chance.

“We are seeing more applicants, but for some of our jobs -- such as delivery drivers -- we need that skill and can't hire someone without that experience,” says [Tiffani Murray](#), HRIS/HR Operations Director for a national retailer.

Dealing with a plethora of resumes

The increase in the unemployment rate has thus tasked HR departments with finding ways to efficiently handle the sudden quantity of applications received and evaluate their quality. This challenge comes in addition to other HR matters demanding attention in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as fielding health insurance questions and promoting EAPs (Employee Assistance Plans).

As might be expected, many companies rely on technology for help – especially since HR staff members still may be working remotely. Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) prove useful for sorting candidates based on predetermined criteria, bringing the most promising candidates to the forefront, communicating who on the team has reviewed an application, and keeping track of interview status.

“One way we work through the high volume of applications is using automated filters,” Alexis says. “For example, we ask applicants if they are eligible to work in the U.S. If the answer is no, then the system automatically rejects the application and our hiring team never sees it. We use similar filter questions that are more pertinent to each job role, too.”

Taub's company employs a related strategy. “As a part of the application, we ask candidates to complete a specific skills assessment relevant to the role; we can then use results to narrow down the field.”

Other measures HR departments report using during this time of high unemployment include:

- Going through applications in the order received and stopping after finding a predetermined number of worthy interviewees
- Inserting unusual instructions within the job posting (such as stating your favorite food in your cover letter or using a specific phrase as the subject line of an email application) and eliminating those who did not do what was asked (a sign of someone lacking attention to detail or not caring enough about the position to read carefully and follow through)
- Ensuring job postings provide detailed descriptions of necessary skills – especially industry-specific ones – in order to encourage viable candidates and discourage those who are simply applying to anything that sounds half-way suitable
- Looking at the cover letter before the resume to see who bothered writing a good one
- Jumping immediately to the resume to judge potential before bothering to read the cover letter
- Installing a chatbot on the company’s recruitment page that enables potential candidates to ask basic questions regarding organizational policies and culture in the hope that good matches will proceed and unfit ones will not bother to submit an application
- Acknowledging receipt of applications but including a note that the organization will only be contacting candidates with whom they are interested in talking further to about the position

Conducting interviews during a pandemic

While earlier in the year HR easily could bring qualified candidates into the office for an interview, this customary next step is no longer a given. A good number of HR professionals are still working from home. Others face limited days on site or restrictions as to who they may let in the building and when.

These obstacles make it more important than ever at some companies to focus on prescreening measures. Employers may ask candidates who make it through the first pass of resumes to provide samples of their work or problem-solve a scenario related to the position at hand. These actions offer additional information to consider before deciding who to further pursue. HR reps also may put more effort into phone screening prior to moving someone to the next round.

Virtual interviews via Zoom or similar platform provide a non-contact way to interview. The ability to see and hear each other offers some semblance of a regular interview’s set-up, including a way to read body language. For those HR departments unaccustomed to video conferencing, however, mastering the technology and helping candidates to use it adds another thing to an already tough workload.

Handling the organization’s own unemployment-related problems

Unfortunately, many businesses are not dealing only with consequences of a hefty unemployment rate. When circumstances necessitate making their own staff cuts, companies are contributing to the figure, too.

“Unemployment is affecting HR departments in terms of organizations that have had to reduce employees and furlough,” Murray says. “This was a huge toll on my team and I and also colleagues I know at other companies -- the sheer process of making sure employees with reduced hours, furloughed, or laid off knew how to navigate unemployment, the pandemic unemployment assistance funds, the \$600 that just ended, and more.”

She further notes that companies have had to adhere to a variety of state and federal regulations around managing and reporting unemployment, leading HR pros to some late nights and stressful weekends.

“In Georgia, for example, employers were tasked with filing on behalf of all furloughed employees or those with reduced hours. This required a data task that was more cumbersome than one might imagine – close to 40 columns to import. Mass filing was the right thing to do for the sake of impacted team members, but it caused

us (HR) to scramble and assemble data sometimes from several systems.”

Remember, too, that this flurry of activity comes during a time when working conditions may be far from ideal. HR members face issues such as accessing files from off-site locations, communicating with colleagues remotely, and trying to juggle work time with their own childcare responsibilities. All of this makes for a year nobody expected back on January 1 – and makes the unforeseen high unemployment rate certainly much more than just a number to those in HR.