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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Job Listings Abound, but Many Are Fake

In an uncertain economy, companies post ads for jobs they might not really be trying to fill

By *Te-Ping Chen*

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A mystery permeates the job market: You apply for a job and hear nothing, but the ad stays online for months. If you inquire, the company tells you it isn't really hiring.

Not all job ads are attached to actual jobs, it turns out. The labor market remains robust, with 10.8 million job openings in January, according to the Labor Department. At the same time, companies are feeling budgetary strains and some are pulling back on hiring. Though businesses are keeping job postings up, many roles aren't being filled, recruiters say.

Hiring managers acknowledge as much. In a survey of more than 1,000 hiring managers last summer, 27% reported having job postings up for more than four months. Among those who said they advertised job postings that they weren't actively trying to fill, close to half said they kept the ads up to give the impression the company was growing, according to Clarify Capital, a small-business-loan provider behind the study. One-third of the managers who said they advertised jobs they weren't trying to fill said they kept the listings up to placate overworked employees.

Other reasons for keeping jobs up, the hiring managers said: Stocking a pool of ready applicants if an employee quits, or just in case an "irresistible" candidate applied.

Postings for "ghost jobs," as recruiters and candidates sometimes refer to them, can be frustrating for job seekers.

"It's a waste of time," says Will Kelly, who lives in the Washington, D.C., area and has been applying for marketing and writing roles.

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Mr. Kelly, who has decades of experience as a technical and marketing writer, estimates that when he was job hunting in late 2021, about 20% of listings that interested him were posted and reposted without anyone evidently being hired. Since his layoff from a startup in August, he says he has noticed that most jobs that catch his eye have been up for months.

“I first thought of it as an anomaly, and now I see it as a trend,” he says.

Given the uncertain economic outlook, some job ads may be more wishful thinking than anything else, says Vincent Babcock, a Nashville, Tenn.-based recruiter. Such a strategy, he says, risks turning off applicants who may view the ads as misleading.

“They’re posting jobs with the intention of hiring, but not anytime soon,” he says, adding that some companies posting jobs now might not be aiming to hire until the third or fourth quarter.

For employers, constantly looking for talent can make sense, says Kelsey Libert, co-founder of Fractl, a digital marketing agency. She says her company keeps ads up for associate positions even when they aren’t hiring, because turnover for those jobs is often higher than other roles.

“Otherwise, you’re suddenly in a position where you need to spend a lot of money on LinkedIn ads to quickly drum up interest,” she says.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Have you come across ‘ghost job’ ads? What’s your advice to job seekers who are tired of feeling let down? Join the conversation below.

An employer that hasn’t been collecting résumés along the way might have fewer people to choose from when jobs open and need to be filled quickly, Ms. Libert adds. Many college seniors look for jobs from April to June, she says, noting that companies don’t want to miss out on that talent just because they didn’t have immediate roles open.

“It’s better for you to hedge by leaving some of those job openings up,” she says.

Some job ads have little correlation to actual job availability because companies require that all jobs be posted, even if a candidate has been predetermined. In other instances, especially at larger companies, poor coordination is to blame, says Elliott Garlock, founder of Stella Talent Partners, a Boston-based recruiting firm.

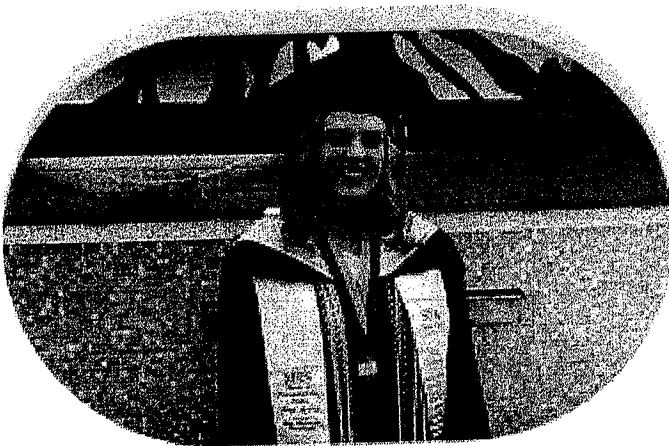
During a previous stint working on talent strategy at Wayfair Inc., Mr. Garlock says, the online retailer frequently advertised jobs that it wasn’t actually hiring for. Plans and budgets were constantly changing, and so many teams were involved in the hiring process that it was hard to ensure job postings stayed up-to-date.

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“It’s not because we were ill-intentioned and out to trick the candidate market,” he says.

Wayfair says it intends to fill every job it posts and makes every effort to treat candidates with care. The company, which announced layoffs in January, says that it is transparent with applicants about changes in hiring decisions and, for companies of its size, removing job postings takes time.

Companies might also be reluctant to take down ads, Mr. Garlock adds, because “we don’t want to signal we’re slowing down, so we’ll let these things ride.”



Brooke Wilemon

PHOTO: TINA WILEMON

Brooke Wilemon says applying for jobs lately has felt like chasing a series of mirages. Ms. Wilemon, who lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, estimates she has applied for around 500 jobs since receiving her master’s in business and public administration last year. Typically she doesn’t hear back, she says. When she does locate someone to talk to, she frequently hears the role isn’t being filled after all.

Ms. Wilemon, 23, recently applied for a job at Nationwide Insurance. As part of her application, she put on makeup, a blazer and jewelry and sat before her computer and recorded answers to a series of automated job-interview questions, doing multiple retakes for each question before she was satisfied.

Soon after, she received an email telling her that the company had decided not to fill the role. “It’s really disheartening,” she says.

Nationwide said that its business needs occasionally change after roles are posted, and that the company tries to communicate and manage applicants’ expectations. It says it doesn’t post “ghost jobs” and has hired more than 600 external candidates since the start of the year.

To avoid ghost ads, Scott Dobroski, vice president of communications at jobs site Indeed, recommends looking for detailed job descriptions. More specifics, such as schedules or a clear list of responsibilities, might indicate that an employer is serious, he says. He also advises checking the timestamp on ads to ensure they were posted recently.

Every month, Indeed removes millions of job postings that don't meet its standards from the website, including inactive job postings, he says.

Indeed says it has recently seen more employers dial back their recruiting efforts. Job postings on the site have fallen by 11% since the start of 2023.

"Many companies are proceeding with caution," he says.

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