

San Francisco Chronicle

Bay Area companies are hiring, but are there enough workers to fill the jobs?



Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

May 18, 2021

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Lily Marquez was working in administration at Samuel Merritt University six years ago when she had her first child. She continued to work part-time at the Oakland school until a daughter came along unexpectedly 11 months later, forcing Marquez, her husband and their children to move into her in-laws' apartment in San Francisco to save money.

Marquez is one of thousands of women who want to go back to work as job openings increase as a result of widespread coronavirus vaccinations. But she, like many others, can't because of obligations like childcare.

"I look forward to the day I'm back in the workforce and I'm helping contribute to my family," Marquez said, regarding their finances.

Situations like hers are part of a question that has vexed economists since jobs numbers released earlier this month found that American employers added just 266,000 jobs in April, down from more than 900,000 in March, and the opposite of muscular economic progress expected by many experts.

With many schools still closed or only partially open, caregiving responsibilities, which mostly fall on women, are part of the reason hiring is not moving at the expected clip. Fears about catching the coronavirus at work and increased unemployment benefits, in part designed to allow people to stay home until they can get vaccinated, may also be part of the picture.

One [analysis](#) found that women left jobs, or the workforce entirely, at higher rates than men in April, pointing toward caregiving responsibilities being at least part of the reason for the sputtering jobs numbers.

Neither a shortage of jobs, nor of people to fill them, seems to be the cause of sluggish hiring, according to Heidi Shierholz, senior economist and director of policy at the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute, who authored the report.

"Job openings are swamped by unemployed workers," Shierholz said, adding a true labor shortage would drive up wages in the industries where businesses were desperate for workers.

That has happened in the restaurant business and in other parts of the leisure and hospitality industry, but a wholesale wage jump across sectors isn't in the cards just yet, Shierholz said.

Restaurant chains Chipotle and McDonald's are two of the businesses that have announced a raise in their minimum wage. Amazon previously said it would pay workers a minimum of \$15 per hour, and Costco and Walmart have also boosted pay in a bid for workers.

In the Bay Area, other large businesses have plenty of openings. FedEx Ground said it plans to hire 900 people at facilities in San Francisco, and thousands more nationwide, as the demand for online shopping and shipping has ballooned during the pandemic.

Demand for shipping has grown so much that truck drivers can make \$14,000 per week in some places, according to [reports](#).

Another reason for the slow growth of jobs last month could be that with economies opening rapidly across the region and the country, it takes time to hire people for so many new openings.

“A lot of what you’re seeing now is new hiring,” said Matthew Sigelman, CEO of labor market analytics firm Burning Glass Technologies.

Sigelman said hiring in California and the Bay Area is accelerating, but companies are having to find new people instead of calling back old workers, particularly in lower-paying jobs. While there may not be a shortage of people who want to work, the surge in demand “is out of balance with the available supply of workers,” Sigelman said.

Demand has also not roared back evenly across all industries. High skilled jobs in places like the Bay Area have been leading the recovery, along with other urban centers, according to a recent [report](#) from jobs site Indeed.com.

But demand for domestic workers like nannies, house cleaners and home care workers remains depressed, according to Ai-jen Poo, co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit National Domestic Workers Alliance.

“It is still a full-blown depression for this workforce,” Poo said, estimating that the sector is seeing about a third of its workforce, who are mostly women of color, unemployed.

Poo pointed to family obligations as part of the reason why many domestic workers remain out of work, along with concerns about catching the virus while traveling from home to home.

While not a panacea, Poo pointed to philanthropic investments, like a recently announced \$50 million investment by [the CARE Fund](#), as one way to expand access to in-home care for children and others.

“It will create a disproportionate benefit to people who’ve been disproportionately harmed in the pandemic,” Poo said, potentially allowing some people to return to the workforce.

Meanwhile, Marquez is still looking for affordable childcare and hopes the state will expand access to it for people like herself, allowing her to return to the workforce.

“Having to choose between being a parent and working is not something anyone should go through,” Marquez said.

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