



JOB STATUS



Cautious optimism is replacing the panic that gripped the jobs market in April-June. While despair persists, certain pockets are witnessing momentum

WE'RE
HIRING



:: Saumya Bhattacharya

In June, when Zaheer Adenwala needed to hire for Ketto, the crowdfunding company he cofounded with Varun Sheth, he decided to tap into a new hiring platform. Called BounceBack List, it matches potential employers with job-seekers who have been laid off in recent months. Ketto has been on a hiring spree of sorts since the pandemic hit, as people and causes seeking crowdfunding have surged. At BounceBack List, Ketto has listed positions such as vice-president of operations, vice-president of products and senior developers. "BounceBack List has a robust database of technology candidates. We should be rolling out offers to senior candidates by July-end," says Adenwala. Ketto is planning to hire 15 people in the July-September quarter to add to its 100-odd employees.

Why hire from among laid-off employees? "There is great tech talent available because certain businesses had to fold. This platform accords us the opportunity to hire good talent on an immediate basis," says Adenwala.

The vanishing of the stigma around getting laid off appears to be one of the main attitudinal shifts that have taken place in the jobs market as a result of a nightmarish summer that saw a spate of layoffs and acute uncertainty.

Employees in Indian companies were worried about

their future and prospects during the April-June quarter more than at any other time in the past. As a pandemic raged outside, panic gripped employees. Is the axe about to fall on their job? Does one need a Plan B? No one had answers. The uncertainty was such that no meaningful modelling was possible. The flux that the job market witnessed in the April-June quarter of 2020 was worse than what it saw during the financial crisis of 2008-09.

Global workforce solutions firm ManpowerGroup has conducted a quarterly employment outlook survey for the last 15 years. For the July-September quarter, it found hiring prospects were the weakest since the survey began. It was down seven percentage points compared with the previous quarter and nine percentage points compared with the year-ago period. When it asked 695 companies about their hiring plans for July-September, 46% of the respondents said "don't know". Even at C-suite levels, companies postponed growth-oriented appointments to a later date as boards pressed the pause button.

As the unlock gathered momentum from June onwards, the green shoots of recovery started to reflect in the macro indicators. But the job market recovery remains elusive. However, during the three months when workers of India Inc spent locked down and in the grip of a panic, certain shifts in attitudes have taken root, and they

5 Trends Shaping the Jobs Market

- 1 Cautious optimism returns in July-September quarter
- 2 Job market churn to continue for some time
- 3 Pockets of hope and despair coexist
- 4 Gig workers find larger acceptance with employers
- 5 Employees begin to look at "work" rather than "job"

Jobs Market: Highs and Lows



India's unemployment rate fell to **10.99%** in June, compared with 23.48% in May, according to data from the Centre for Monitoring India Economy

White-collar jobs for freshers saw a sharp uptick in June from lockdown levels, says data from Freshersworld.com, Indeed.com and Naukri.com



Critical hiring is continuing and CEOs/senior leaders are successfully hired and integrated



Despite revoked campus offers, students are getting other job offers

Retail industry has witnessed attrition rates of 36-50% in stores due to reverse migration of the workforce



About 2 in every 3 interviews are getting delayed, (especially in services sectors)



66% of organisations have deferred or suspended their hiring schedule at different job levels



"Sophistication is starting to gain currency in gig economy. At the same time, the notion of 9-to-5 job has evaporated. Deloitte's research shows that three out of every five employers will begin to look at gig workers"

SV Nathan, chief talent officer, Deloitte India

Source: TeamLease, ET reports

Rise of Gigs

Top skills in demand during the pandemic

Strategy and Business Development

Business planning, reviewing strategies and business models, supporting transformation programmes



Information Technology

Analytics and data science, product managers, UI/UX specialists



Marketing

Digital marketing, brand strategists



Research and Academia

Assessing the impact of Covid-19 on livelihoods, strengthening healthcare systems and capacity



could mark a decisive shift in how we view jobs.

The idea that your next job might not really be a job in the conventional sense, and is more likely to be a limited-term contract or a project – a white-collar gig, as it were – is gaining acceptance. The economic contraction is nudging companies towards freelancers and consultants as they like having a greater leverage on costs.

“Sophistication in the gig economy is starting to gain currency. At the same time, the notion of 9-to-5 job has evaporated. Deloitte research shows that three out of every five employers will begin to look at gig workers,” says SV Nathan, chief talent officer, Deloitte India.

The three-month lull in the jobs market and the spate of layoffs in some sectors seem to have lessened the social stigma around layoffs, as we saw with hiring managers at Ketto. Employers are looking at laid-off talent pool as just that – a talent pool to hire from.

The platform that Ketto is hiring from, Bouncebacklist.com, launched by the recruitment and HR consulting firm Omam Consultants, provides a free job portal and resources for companies and individuals. Sakshi Kapahi, director, Omam, says, “In early April, we began asking affected employees, companies and recruiters alike: How can we help you during this time of uncertainty? BounceBack List is our initiative towards helping those recently impacted by this pandemic.” BounceBack List was conceptualised at the Stanford Seed leadership lab and put together with advisors from research institutes and industries coming together, says Kapahi. Less than a month after its launch, it has about 50 employers – small and large companies alike – reaching out to hire people who have lost jobs. The job postings in pharma, chemicals, metals, BFSI, analytics and marketing tech pay anything between ₹10 lakh and ₹80 lakh.

When Surabhi Rao, a senior HR executive in the auto industry with a smooth career trajectory spanning more than a decade, was laid off in April, she decided to become a gig-worker. She joined Flexing It, a gig platform for freelance and project-based work that saw a 75% spike in the number of freelance positions published in April. “I’ve always seen white-collar gigs as a sharpshooter project, when my specific skillset is applied to a variety of industries and organisations. It’s a win-win because the organisation gets a specialist who is adaptable and delivers to the need of the project, while the consultant gets a wide variety of applications of skill,” says the HR

Who is Hiring?



source: Flexing It

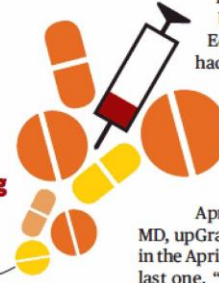
Professional Services, Consulting

Personal & Household Products (FMCG)

Development / Not for Profit

IT Services & Consulting

Healthcare & Pharma



executive. Freelancers like her find gigs far more rewarding from a professional learning point-of-view. “The scope to learn, build on an existing skill, expand one’s network and grow as a professional is unlimited,” she says, adding that she does not think she will go back to a full-time role anytime soon. This sentiment is reflected in numbers. Flexing It’s consultant registrations more than doubled from January-March quarter to April-June period.

“We’ve seen a greater openness on the client side to remote, distributed teams and project-based work. While this was a trend before the pandemic, it is being accelerated by the worldwide work-from-home mandate,” says Flexing It founder Chandrika Pasricha.

Cautious Optimism

For now, the job market remains fluid, though cautious optimism has replaced the fear experienced in the April-June quarter. Says K Sudarshan, regional chair – Asia and managing director, EMA Partners India: “Economic activity has certainly perked up in the last three-four weeks as companies are restarting their business operations. The general sentiment is relatively better, and there is an air of optimism. However, we do not expect any miracles overnight.”

Employers are also navigating uncertainty, and their biggest concerns are revenues, cash flows and productive deployment of resources. “Till such time their current employees are operating at peak capacity, companies will not add to their headcount, especially at the entry and mid-levels. However, at the senior levels, companies with a strategic telescopic view of the business are open to adding key people at the top who will bring in long-term competitive advantage for them,” adds Sudarshan. Some, like Pallavi Kathuria, managing partner at Egon Zehnder India, call it the inflection point for companies to think about their future. “It is a time of unprecedented creativity. Reimagining jobs around the constraints of today’s challenging business environment is accelerating the future of work; opening up new and innovative ways in how, where and by whom work gets done,” says Kathuria. This is also because there is no precedent. The pandemic is a humanity problem. In any previous crisis, it was economic uncertainty, while for the first time, economic uncertainty is being linked to personal and family well-being, she adds.

In early June, ManpowerGroup’s global employment outlook survey found that only 5% of Indian companies said they planned to

hire in the quarter ahead. Even as Unlock 1.0 gathered pace, overall hiring numbers remained significantly down compared with the corresponding period last year. White-collar jobs for freshers saw an upswing in June, despite demand for talent being down 30-60% from pre-Covid-19 levels, according to data from job sites Freshersworld.com, Indeed.com and Naukri.com. There were other pockets of hope. At IIT-Delhi, despite some revoked offers, placements ended with 1,100 job offers, up 4% from last year. Of these, 100 offers were received during online placements. Of the many companies who had instituted salary cuts or deferred hikes and bonuses, a couple are beginning to take positive action. Edtech company upGrad, which had instituted salary cuts of 10-30% above ₹6 lakh-levels, revoked the decision and said that 100% of the amount cut would be given back to all employees in the July salary, given the growth in the business in the April-June quarter. Mayank Kumar, MD, upGrad, says enrolments went up 20% in the April-June quarter compared with the last one. “While there may be some white-collar job losses coming in some sectors, there are certain pockets including sales and marketing where there’s a return to normalcy,” says Kumar.

Earlier this week, PwC India said it would announce deferred promotions, compensation revisions and bonus payouts for employees on October 1, 2020, while executive director promotions and partner admissions would be announced in December to be effective from January 1, 2021. Earlier, partners and executive directors at PwC had taken pay cuts of up to 25% this year, while increments, promotions and bonus payouts were deferred for all employees. Recessions so far were primarily a result of shrinking demand. However, the recession during the Covid crisis is primarily a result of supply chains being choked worldwide, says BigBasket HR head TN Hari. “After unlocking, factories are opening, logistics have resumed and some economic activity has taken off. So there are green shoots across the economy,” adds Hari. Jobs market pundits such as Hari and Pankaj Bansal, founder of PeopleStrong, are hopeful that the wheels of the economy will start cranking soon and with that, the jobs market will see a sharp recovery. “There is hope; opening up is key to reviving the job market,” says Bansal. ■

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TN Hari,
HR head, BigBasket



“Gig workers thrive in uncertainty. Once demand starts to come back, companies will still want to keep variable workers in the next 12-18 months”

Chandrika Pasricha,
founder, Flexing It