

Steady Growth Continues

Staffing and recruiting grows faster than the economy and the labor market

By Cynthia Poole

More than six years since the end of the Great Recession, the U.S. economy has yet to fully recover. While there has been expansion, this long road to recovery has been erratic. And although the jobs lost during the 18-month recession have been regained and the unemployment rate has declined, the percentage of people participating in the labor force has dropped to the lowest level in four decades. There are nearly six million open jobs, and more than eight million people out of work—contributing to the longer than anticipated recovery cycle. Meanwhile, the staffing and recruiting industry has been growing faster than gross domestic product and overall employment at rates unlike any prior recovery. Are these trends unique to the current expansion, or has there been a fundamental change in the role of staffing and recruiting in the economy? ➤

Editor's note: This analysis, prepared September 2015, provides an overview of the size, scope, and dynamics of the U.S. staffing and recruiting industry. It is intended as a general reference for staffing companies, staffing clients, industry analysts, journalists, and policy makers. The analysis is also available on the ASA website at americanstaffing.net (click on Research & Data) as well as on ASA Digital at americanstaffing.net/digital, which offers interactive, page-turning replicas of select ASA publications.





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Slow Road to Economic Recovery

The Great Recession was the longest and most severe since World War II. On average, the 10 recessions from WWII until the Great Recession lasted about 10 and a half months.¹ The Great Recession lasted 18 months.²

Beginning in December 2007, real gross domestic product (GDP)—the output of goods and services produced by labor and property located in the U.S.—declined in five of the subsequent six quarters to mid-2009. At that point, the cumulative damage was a striking -4.3%, far exceeding the depth of the prior worst recession in the postwar era, which was a 3.6% decline in 1957.³ That recession lasted less than a year, and the U.S. economy recovered in just two quarters.⁴ The Great Recession lasted a year and a half and, after more than six years, GDP has yet to fully recover.

Since the beginning of the expansion in July 2009, quarterly GDP has grown at an average annualized rate of 2.2%, below the 2.8% rate of the 2002–07 expansion (see Figure 1) and well below the overall average annual rate of 3.4% from 1930, when the U.S. Department of Commerce first began tracking GDP, to 2014.⁵

Economic forecasts for 2014 were bullish, with most experts believing that the pace of recovery had picked up and the economy would further strengthen in 2014. And despite an unanticipated decline of 0.9% in the first quarter of 2014,⁶ largely attributed to harsh winter weather, GDP rebounded in the second quarter, leaping to 4.6% and a solid 4.3% in the third quarter—only the second time economic growth had exceeded 4% since 2006. In the fourth quarter of 2014, however, the economy slowed—growing just 2.1% and dampening expectations for 2015.⁷

The economy slowed further in the first quarter of 2015, due in part to a prolonged period of severe winter weather. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported first quarter annualized growth

of just 0.6%.⁸ The deceleration in fourth quarter GDP growth for 2014 combined with the anemic first quarter of 2015 led economists to substantially lower their GDP projections for the full year.

From July 2014 through April 2015, economists surveyed monthly by the *Wall Street Journal* had projected annual GDP growth for 2015 ranging from 2.7% to 3.0%.⁹ But in May 2015, their average GDP forecasts dropped, ranging between 2.1% and 2.2% through August.¹⁰

In the September survey, *Wall Street Journal* economists upgraded their average annual GDP forecasts to 2.4% for 2015.¹¹ That would put economic expansion during this recovery 1.6 percentage points below the 4.0% annual growth rate average for the six recoveries from 1960 to 2007.¹²

Predictions for 2016 remain muted, with the consensus for full-year GDP at 2.6%. If correct, that would be the strongest growth since the Great Recession, but still well below prior years.¹³ Will that forecast hold, or will the projection follow the recent pattern of downward revisions, pushing economic recovery even further out?

Shifts in the Labor Market

Along with the myriad reports of slow economic growth, the news has been filled with reports of shifts in the labor market, modest job gains, and decreasing workforce participation. As one commentator put it, “We are clearly experiencing a structural change in employment, one that is a major drag on the overall economy.”¹⁴

Unemployment: Slowly Declining

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics counts a person as unemployed if he or she does not have a job, has actively looked for work in the past four weeks, and is currently available for work.¹⁵

Even the healthiest economy will have some level of unemployment. Determining the low end of *sustainable* unemployment within the slowly recovering

economy has been challenging, and that level has also changed over time. Estimates suggest that the long-run normal level of sustainable unemployment ranges from 5% to 6%.¹⁶

As with the economy, the change in the rate of unemployment in the U.S. has slowed in recent years.

After a high of 10.0% in 2010, the unemployment rate began a downward trend, with appreciable declines in 2013. From 2013 through 2014, the unemployment rate averaged 6.8%, descending to 5.1% in August 2015¹⁷—the lowest rate in seven years, but still higher than 5.0% at the start of the recession (see Figure 2).

Corresponding with the decline in the unemployment rate, the number of initial claims for unemployment benefits also dropped. In December 2013, the four-week average number of applications for unemployment benefits was 349,000.¹⁸ While the weekly number of initial claims fluctuated in subsequent months, generally there was a downward trend, sinking to 255,000 in July 2015—the lowest level in more than 40 years. Unemployment claims edged up in recent weeks to 275,000 in September 2015.¹⁹

Recipients of jobless benefits fell from 2.9 million in December 2013 to 2.4 million in December 2014, on down to 2.2 million in May 2015—the smallest number of recipients in nearly 15 years.²⁰ The number of jobless benefit recipients edged up slightly nearing 2.3 million in September 2015.²¹

As the level of unemployment has shifted, so too has the “natural rate”—the level when the economy is in a state of full employment, with little or no inflation, or the minimum *sustainable* rate of unemployment with inflation. In 2012, Federal Reserve researchers computed a “new natural rate” of unemployment at 5.6% to 5.7%.²²

Updated calculations of the natural rate of unemployment estimate that the value fell recently to around 5% and could fall to around 4.4% to 4.8% by 2020, as the

Figure 1: GDP Slow to Recover With Growth Still Below the Prerecession Average. Will GDP Edge Up as Forecast?

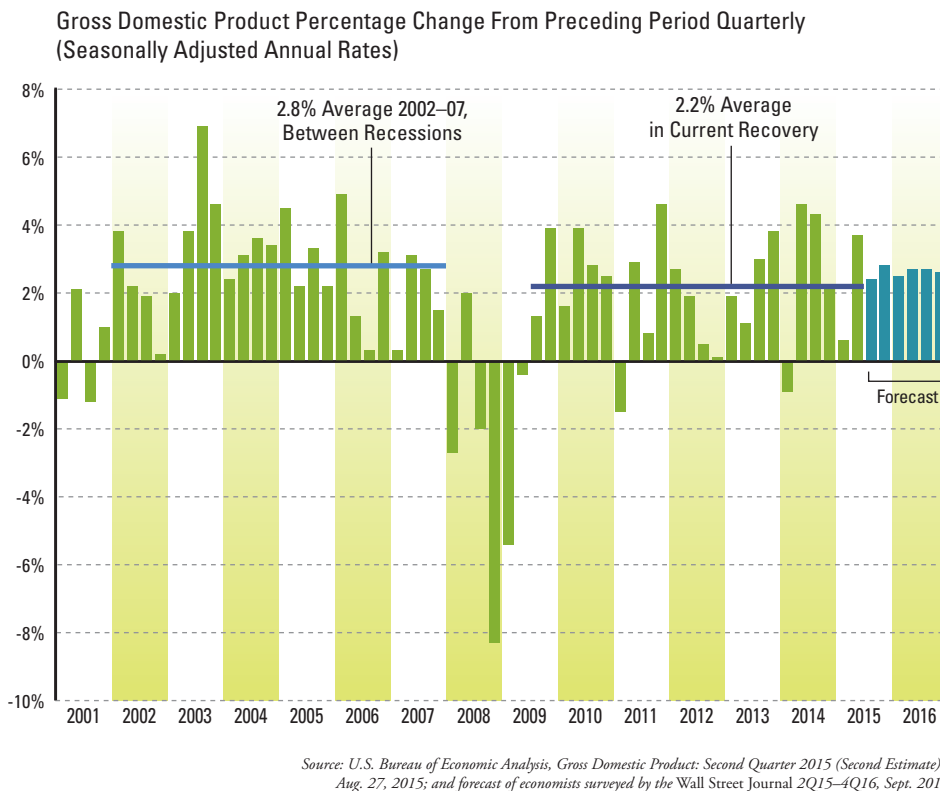
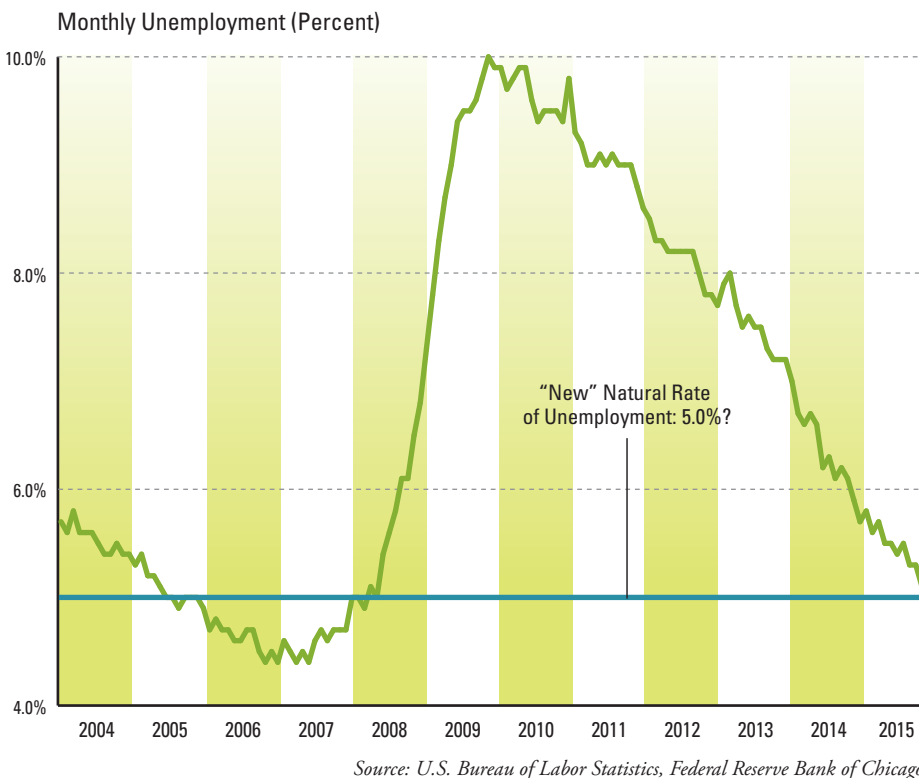


Figure 2: The Unemployment Rate Declined to 5.1% in August 2015. Will Unemployment Dip to the “New” Natural Rate in 2015?



U.S. population ages and more people stay in school longer, according to Chicago Fed researchers.²³

The August 2015 unemployment rate is nearing the new natural rate and seems poised for further declines. Economists surveyed by the *Wall Street Journal* in September 2015 expect the unemployment rate to decline to 5.0% by year-end, and drop further in 2016 to 4.8%.²⁴

On the surface, a declining unemployment rate would seem to be good news. But there is a swell of speculation that the unemployment rate may be decreasing because more people are disengaging from the workforce. The question is whether the decline in unemployment will be balanced by an increase in the number of people able and willing to work, or will the close to six million available jobs continue to go unfilled—creating an additional drag on the economy?

Labor Force Participation: Decreasing

Labor force growth is an important component of overall economic growth.²⁵

The U.S. civilian labor force—defined as the number of people working or looking for work—has experienced significant shifts in size and demographic composition, especially since World War II.²⁶

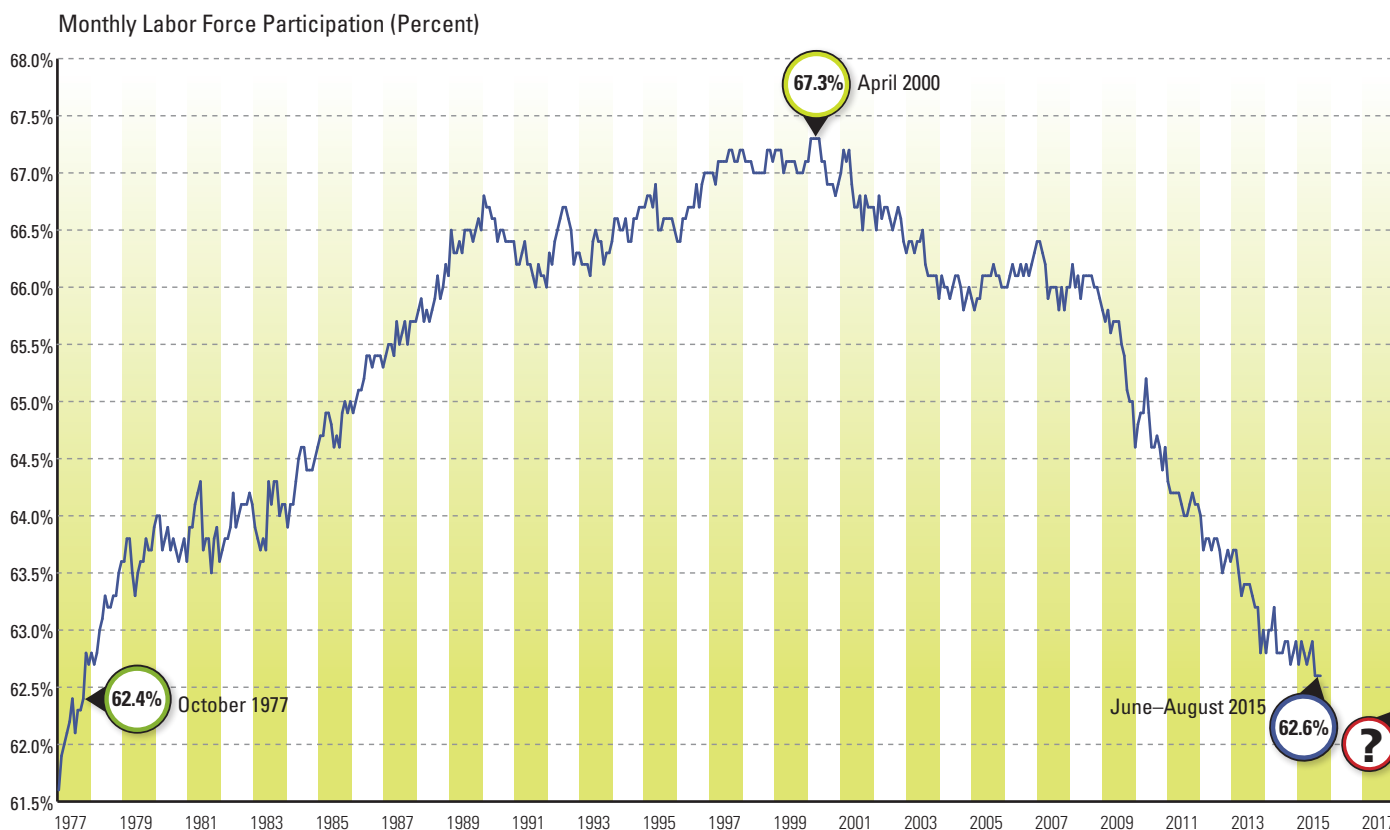
The proportion of women in the labor force rose after World War II, and peaked in 1999, but has been declining since. Growth of the population slowed in the first decade of the 21st century. And large numbers of Baby Boomers are now retiring and exiting the workforce. These have all contributed to labor force declines.

Just as greater participation by women and an increasing population helped expand the labor market previously, the reversal of these trends may now be factors dampening economic expansion and decelerating GDP growth.²⁷

The labor force participation rate—the share of the working-age population either employed or seeking a job—peaked at 67.3% in April 2000. The participation rate has been on a downward trend since that time, dropping to 62.6% June through August 2015—the lowest level since October 1977²⁸ (see Figure 3).

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that about 1.75 percentage points of the more than 3-point decline since the beginning of the Great Recession (when the participation rate was 65.9%) is most notably attributable to the aging population and the slow growth economy in recent years²⁹—accounting for just over half of the decrease in the labor force participation rate. Limited employment opportunities due to lack of necessary skills or training, and job seekers becoming discouraged have also contributed to the decline, according to CBO.³⁰

Figure 3: Labor Force Participation Has Trended Downward Since April 2000, Hitting a Low Not Seen Since 1977. Will More Workers Disengage, Further Dropping Participation?



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Even with the recent decrease in unemployment, labor force participation is projected to decline further as more Baby Boomers scale back on hours worked or retire, and greater numbers of job seekers drop out of the workforce altogether. CBO projects that the labor force participation rate will edge down to 62.0% by the end of 2019.³¹

Thus, it seems clear that the overarching challenge facing policy makers at all levels is not only to find the right prescriptions for growing the economy, but also to help ensure that Americans have the right education, skills, and incentives to seek and perform the jobs a 21st century economy requires. In the meantime, the shrinking pool of job seekers and the need to continue to improve efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness is challenging employers to develop and embrace new and more flexible workforce solutions.

Growth in Staffing and Recruiting

Historically, staffing employment has been a coincident economic indicator and a leading employment indicator.³² What that means is staffing employment trends coincide with economic trends (as measured by GDP) and occur in advance of overall employment trends.

In other words, as the economy grows, so does staffing employment. And as GDP slows or contracts, staffing employment decelerates or diminishes. Because overall employment trends tend to lag economic trends, and staffing employment coincides with economic trends, changes in staffing employment frequently portend changes in overall employment.

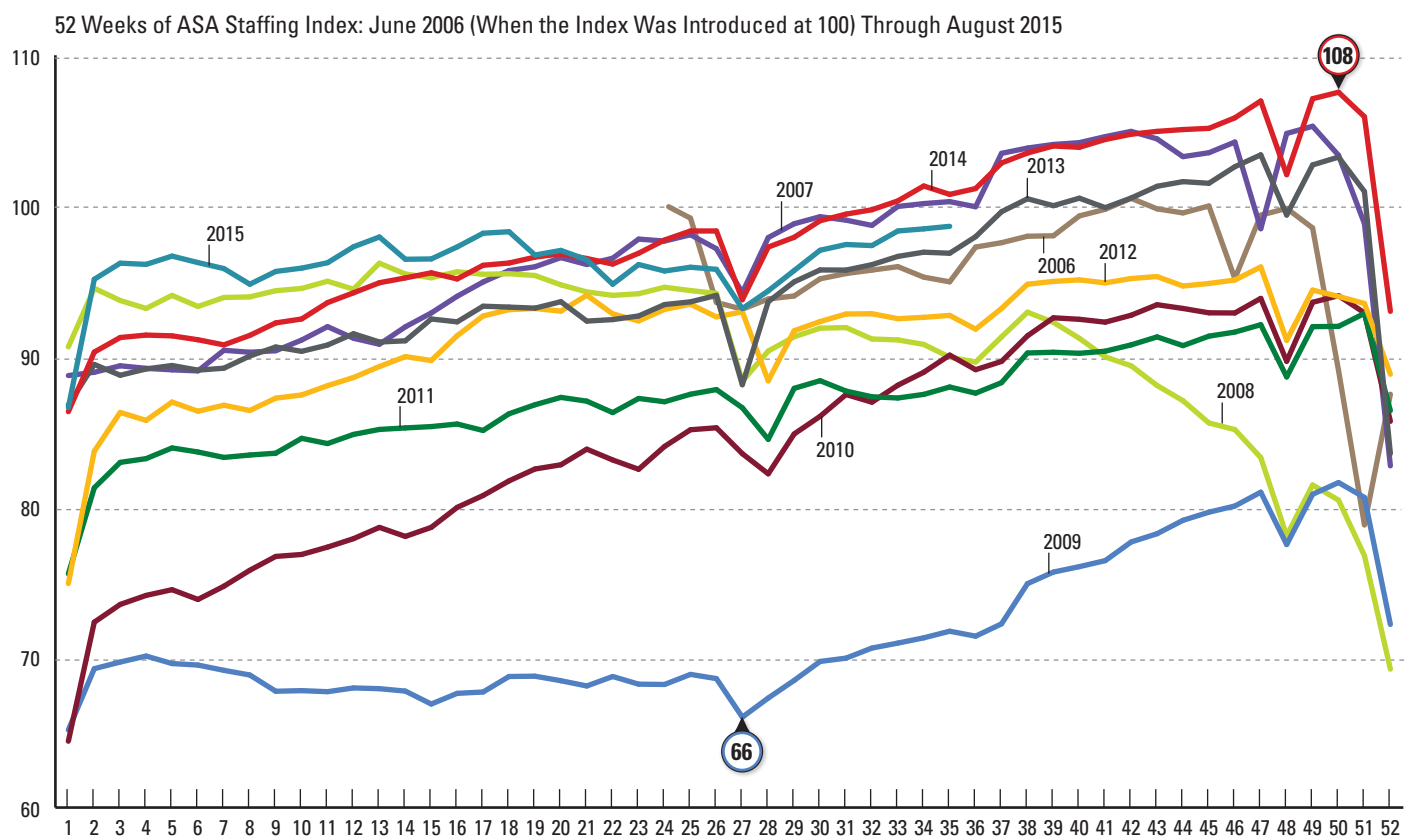
The ASA Staffing Index provides a near real-time gauge of staffing industry employment and overall economic activity. It tracks weekly trends in temporary and contract employment, with results

reported nine days after the close of a workweek (see “Methodology of ASA Economic Surveys” on page 10).

The index was set at 100 when it was publicly launched June 12, 2006. Weekly percentage changes in temporary and contract employment are reflected in the index, allowing observers to easily see how staffing employment has changed over time. For example, the index troughed at 66 in midsummer 2009, indicating that staffing employment had fallen about 34% from its level in mid-June 2006. The index reached a record high of 108 in December 2014, eclipsing the previous peak of 105 in mid-October 2007 (see Figure 4).

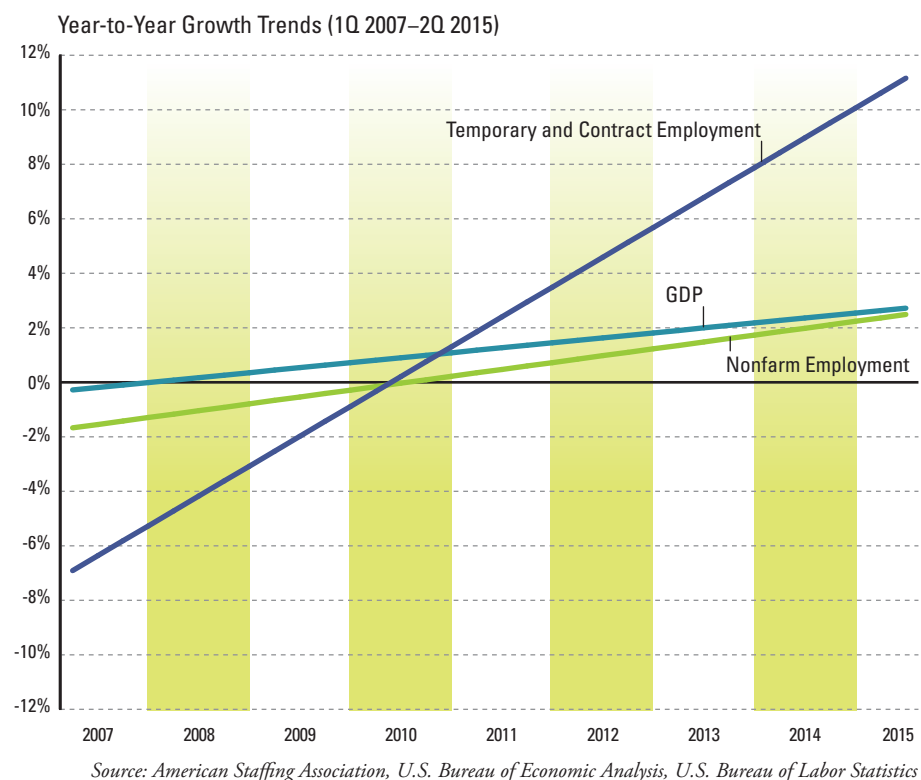
The index reflected continued year-to-year growth in early 2015, with record highs for 19 of the first 20 weeks. While growth moderated somewhat in the second quarter, since the recovery began in July 2009, staffing employment has been

Figure 4: After Falling to a Record Low in Summer 2009, the ASA Staffing Index Reached a Record High in December 2014—Confirming Remarkable Postrecession Staffing Employment Growth.



Source: American Staffing Association, Staffing Index

Figure 5: Staffing Employment Growth Continues to Outpace the Economy and Overall Growth in Nonfarm Employment.



growing three and a half times faster than the economy and seven times more rapidly than overall employment (see Figure 5).

Temporary and Contract Jobs: Recovered

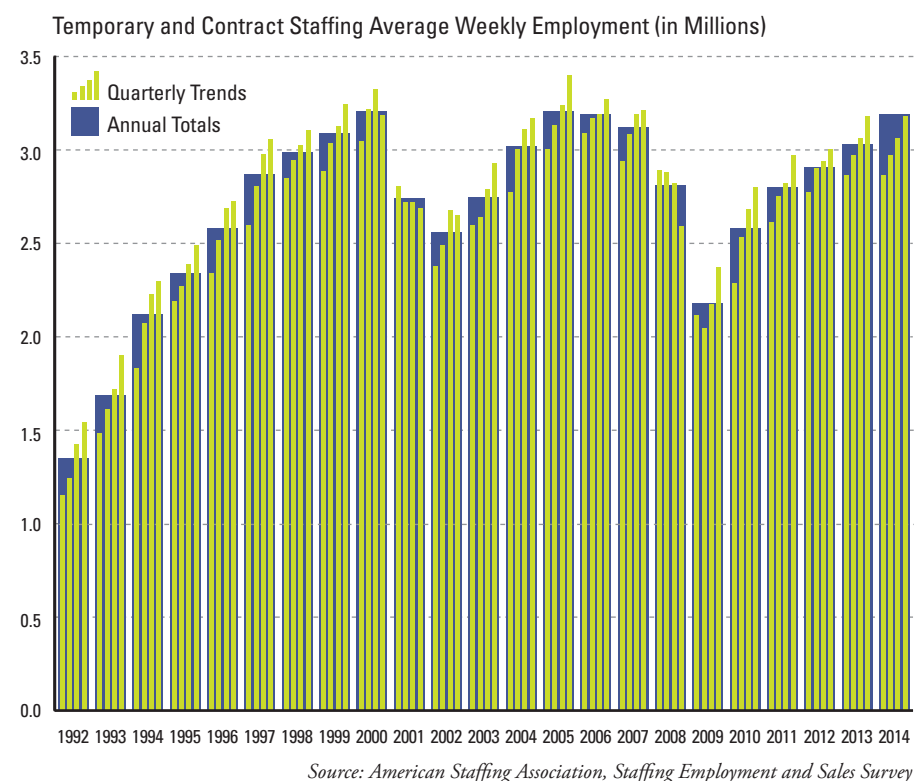
Staffing employment in the U.S. returned to prerecession levels in 2014, rising from a low of 2.2 million jobs per week on average in 2009, up to 3.2 million in 2014, according to the quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey (see Figure 6). Staffing firms hired 5.4% more temporary and contract workers on an average weekly basis in 2014 than in 2013.³³

ASA began estimating temporary and contract employment through a quarterly survey of staffing firms after BLS suspended monthly measurement of jobs in the temporary help services industry in 1990. When BLS resumed measuring temporary help jobs in 2000, ASA maintained its survey. The quarterly ASA employment survey is similar to the BLS monthly jobs survey, and the ASA Staffing Index is similar to the ASA quarterly survey. While the three surveys measure different aspects of the industry and absolute results vary, typically the data statistically correlate. (See sidebar “Methodology of ASA Economic Surveys” on page 10.)

To try to make employment metrics as measured by BLS and ASA as comparable as possible, average weekly employment data are collected for the same select weeks. It should be noted that most temporary and contract work assignments are finite and of relatively short duration, and therefore weekly employment figures do not reflect the total number of people who work for the staffing industry over the course of a month or even during a year.

To determine annual employment in the staffing industry, ASA collects data on the total number of Forms W-2 issued annually to temporary and contract employees by the staffing firms that participate in the association’s quarterly survey. Based on those data, ASA estimates the

Figure 6: U.S. Staffing Firm Jobs Reached Prerecession Levels in 2014, Rising to a Weekly Average of 3.2 Million From a Low of 2.2 Million in 2009.



total number of temporary and contract employees who have worked in the staffing industry for any period of time during the calendar year.

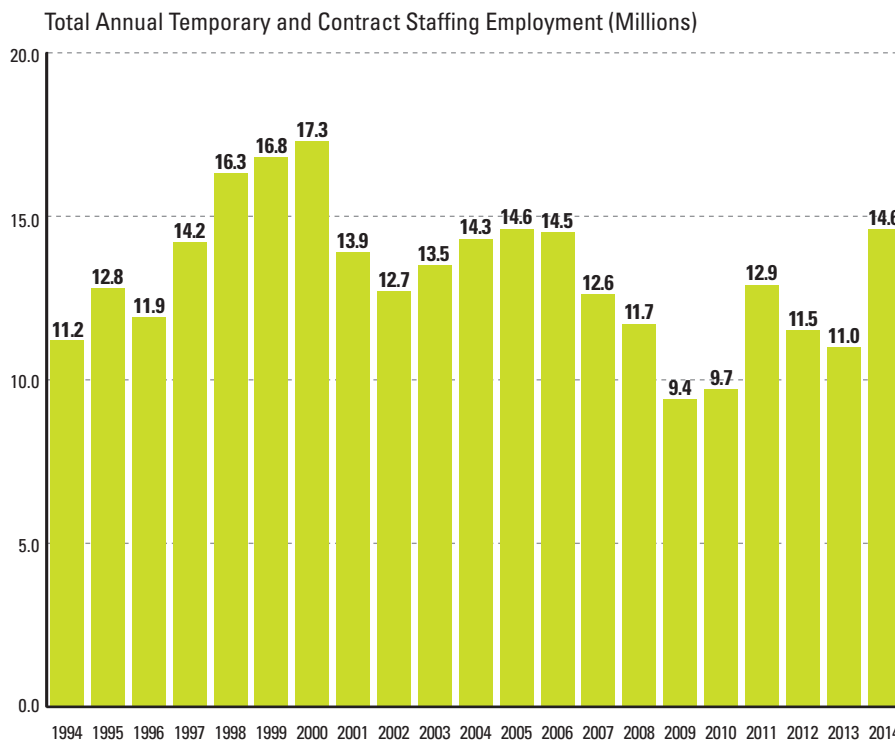
Over the course of 2014, U.S. staffing firms hired a total of 14.6 million temporary and contract employees, up 32.7% from 11.0 million in 2013—bringing annual staffing employment back to prerecession levels (see Figure 7).³⁴

Turnover, Tenure, and Conversion

Although average weekly and annual staffing employment increased in 2014, temporary and contract employees worked substantially fewer days on average, resulting in markedly higher employee turnover.

Turnover is the rate at which incoming employees replace outgoing employees over the course of a year. It is calculated using average weekly employment and the number of annual Forms W-2. Turnover is considerably higher in the staffing industry

Figure 7: U.S. Staffing Firms Hired a Total of 14.6 Million Temporary and Contract Employees During 2014—Back to Prerecession Levels.



Source: American Staffing Association, Staffing Employment and Sales Survey

Staffing and Recruiting Sales Increased 5.9% in 2014 to \$130 Billion

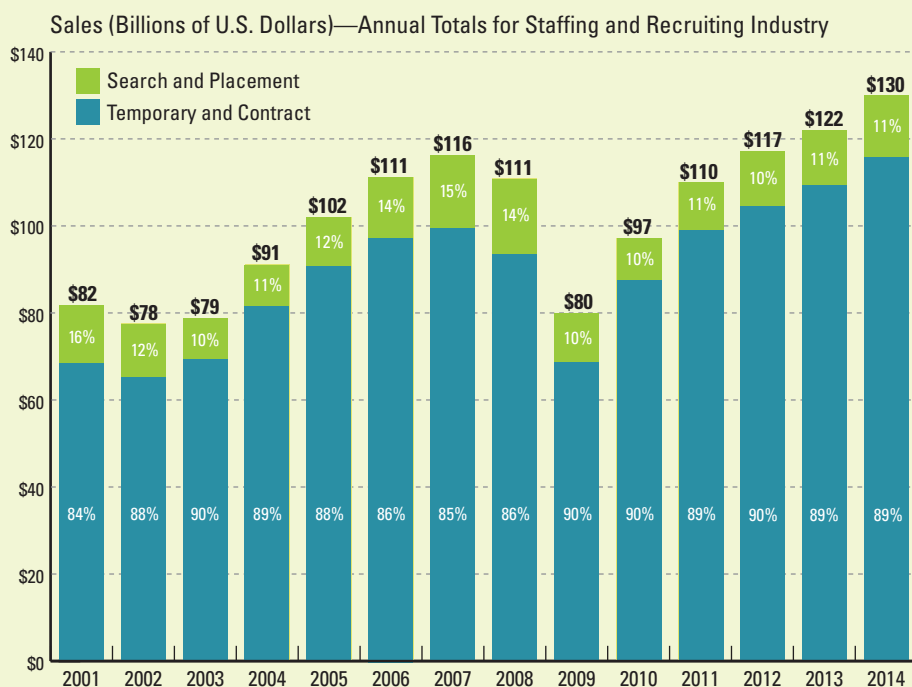
Temporary and contract staffing sales totaled \$115.5 billion in 2014, according to the quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey—an increase of 5.7% over 2013.³⁵

Search and placement sales grew 7% in 2014, according to Staffing Industry Analysts. Applying SIA's yearly growth estimates to the most recent (2007) U.S. Economic Census benchmark shows that search and placement sales totaled \$14.1 billion in 2014.³⁶

U.S. staffing industry sales set a new annual record at \$129.6 billion in 2014—5.9% more than in 2013. Staffing industry sales comprise temporary and contract services, in addition to search and placement services, which accounted for 10.9% of total staffing and recruiting industry sales in 2014.

SIA forecasts U.S. temporary and contract staffing sales will grow 7% in 2015 and 6% in 2016; search and placement sales are expected to increase 12% and 11% in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Total Staffing and Recruiting Industry Sales—including Temporary and Contract, and Search and Placement—Increased 5.9% to \$130 Billion in 2014.



Source: American Staffing Association, Staffing Industry Analysts Inc., U.S. Department of Commerce

compared to other industries because most employees work for their staffing firms for relatively short periods.

Temporary and contract employee turnover has averaged 311% over the past five years. In 2014, staffing employee turnover rose to 359%, up from 263% in 2013 (see Figure 8).

Turnover is a function of, and inversely related to, tenure—the duration of employment with a staffing firm: the shorter the tenure, the higher the turnover and vice versa.

Temporary and contract employee tenure has gradually increased in the two decades over which ASA has been tracking it, generally adding a day or two per year, averaging 12.8 weeks (about three months) over the past five years. Tenure rose in 2012 to 13.2 weeks, and climbed even higher in 2013 to 14.3 weeks (see Figure 8).

The increase in turnover in 2014 is a reflection of lower average staffing

employee tenure of 11.3 weeks—near the 11.0 week average seen between recessions (2002–2006). The shorter tenure can largely be attributed to an improving economy and more temporary and contract workers bridging to permanent jobs.

Staffing Penetration Rate: Peaking?

Temporary help services accounted for one in 10 job losses during the Great Recession, and, not surprisingly, have been responsible for one in 10 net nonfarm employment gains from the end of the recession to August 2015.³⁷ This type of cyclical increase is consistent with the recuperation of jobs in a recovering economy.

The staffing industry's longstanding labor force penetration rate peak was 2.03% of nonfarm employment in April 2000 (see Figure 9)—or approximately 2.7 million temporary help workers, according to BLS. The penetration rate dropped to 1.64% in December 2001 at the end of

that year's recession, then rose to 1.95% in November 2005, near the apex of the prior economic expansion.

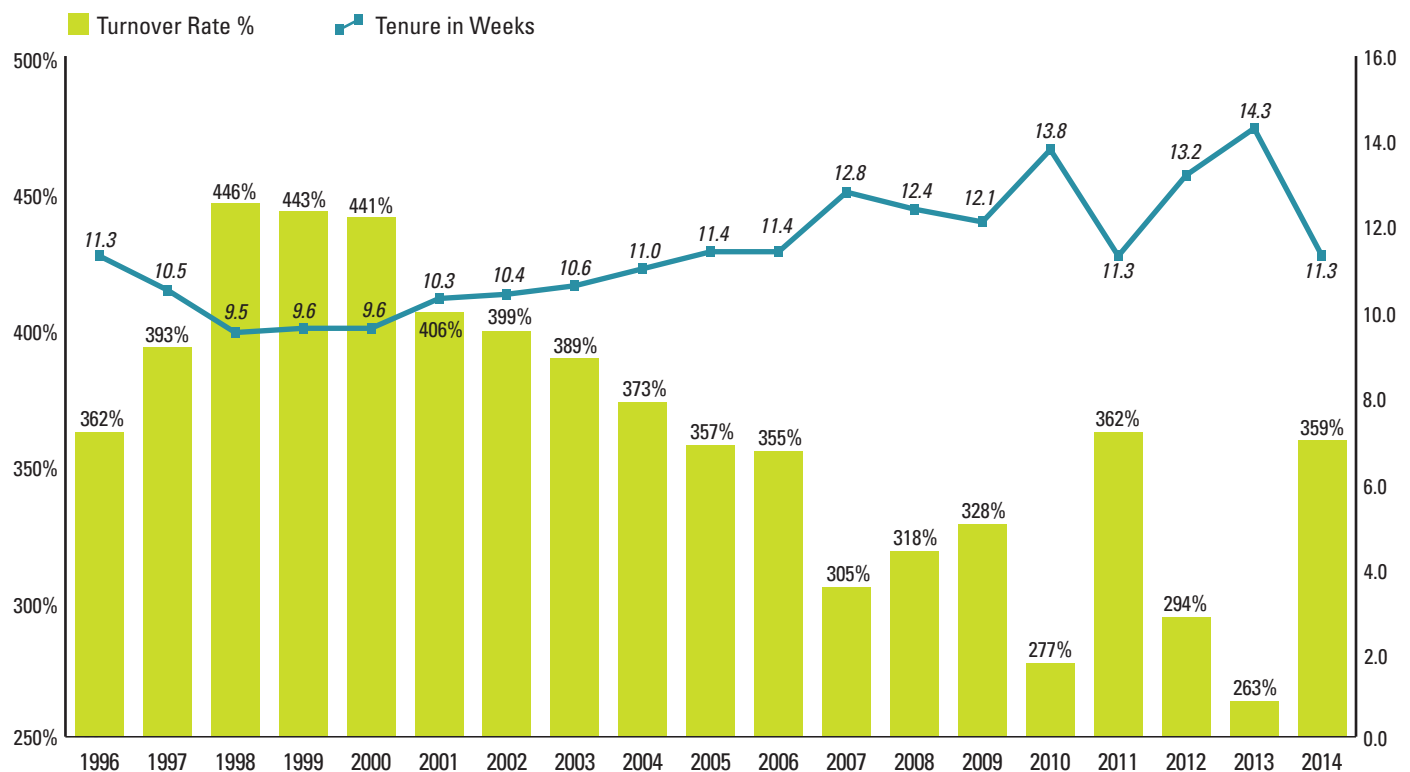
During the Great Recession, temporary and contract employment shrank by 30%—nearly a million jobs—and the penetration rate sank to 1.34% June through August 2009, as the economy began its recovery. In the six years since, staffing employment has continuously increased, faster than overall nonfarm employment, reaching 2.9 million temporary help workers and a new record penetration rate of 2.05% in June 2015 (see Figure 9).

Will Staffing Growth Continue?

After six years on the road to recovery, the economy is still healing from the Great Recession. Although lost jobs have been regained, there are more people unemployed than there are jobs, and fewer people are looking for work.

There is much speculation about what is causing slower economic growth and the

Figure 8: The Average Staffing Employee Works About Three Months. In 2014, Staffing Employee Turnover Increased to 359% and Tenure Decreased to 11.3 Weeks.



Source: American Staffing Association, Staffing Employment and Sales Survey

reasons behind more prevalent disengagement from the workforce. This gives rise to the question: Is this a “new normal”?

Staffing employment trends have historically coincided with economic growth, and suggested that solid growth in overall employment would soon follow; instead, during this recovery, there have been erratic shifts in economic growth and weak overall employment growth.

At the same time, the staffing and recruiting industry grew two and a half times faster than the economy in 2014 (5.9% versus 2.4%, respectively). The industry is on track to grow three times faster than the economy in 2015.

With GDP a paltry 1.5% in 2013 and mediocre 2.4% in 2014,³⁸ businesses seem to be adjusting their employment strategies to better weather the economic volatility. In addition to directly hiring permanent employees, companies are increasingly turning to staffing services to augment their workforces and enhance their flexibil-

ity and agility in accord with the ebb and flow of the economy.

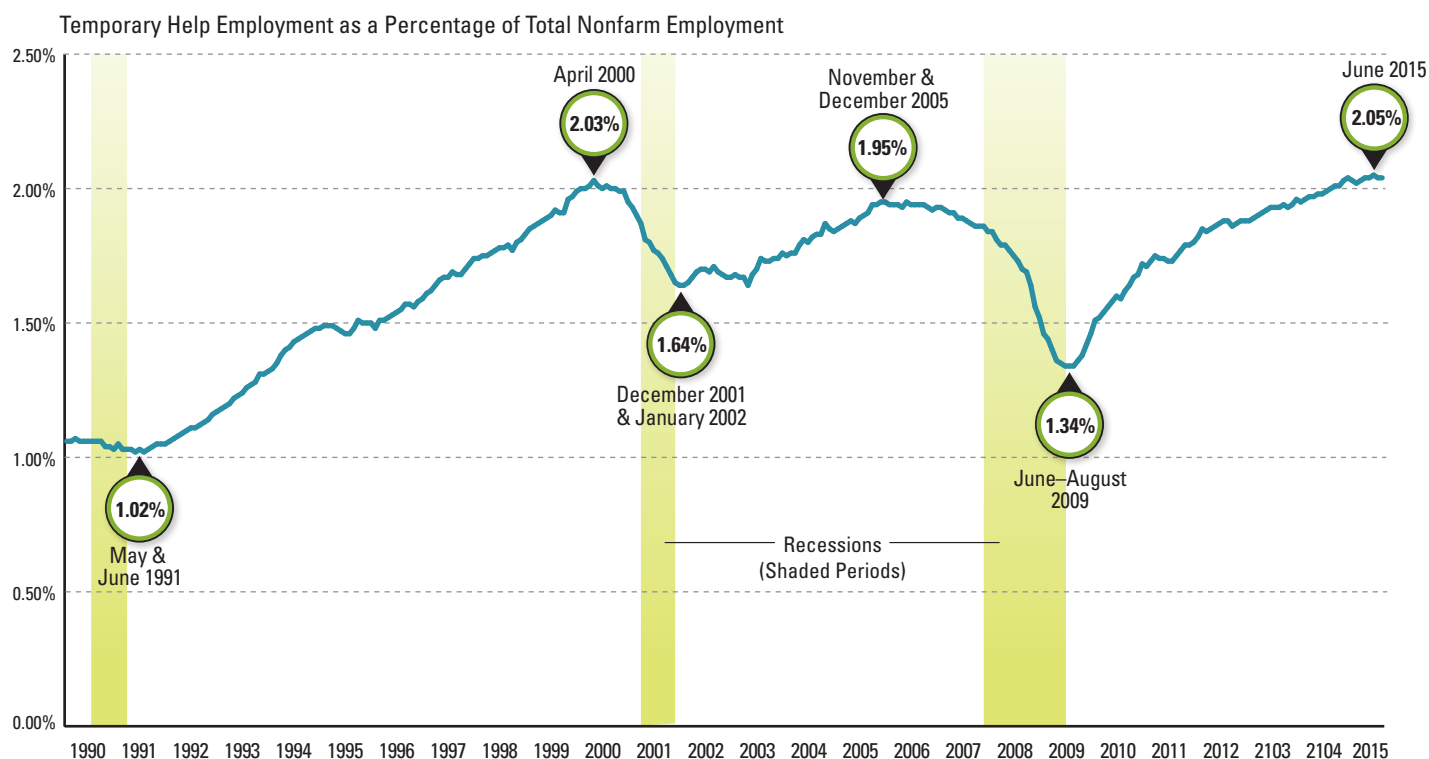
“Businesses are searching for and finding the right mix of [temporary] and permanent workers to drive their businesses forward,” said Steve Cooper, chief executive office of TrueBlue.³⁹

These trends suggest that a fundamental, or secular, shift is helping to drive demand. And, at least until the next economic downturn occurs, the staffing and recruiting industry is forecasted to continue growing faster than the economy and overall employment—creating an abundance of temporary, contract, and permanent employment opportunities for job seekers. ■

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Figure 9: The Staffing Penetration Rate (the Percentage of the Nonfarm Workforce Employed by Staffing Firms) Reached a Record High in 2015.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Methodology of ASA Economic Surveys

The American Staffing Association provides the only survey-based quarterly estimate of U.S. temporary and contract staffing sales. The quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey—which covers approximately 10,000 establishments (about a third of the industry)—also tracks employment and payroll, with results that parallel the establishment surveys of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The survey is used to estimate total industry employment, sales, and payroll, based on a model developed for ASA by Standard & Poor's DRI / McGraw-Hill in 1992. DRI conducted a census of ASA members and a survey of selected nonmember firms. Using this and related government data, DRI prepared annual estimates for 1990 and 1991 and a stratified-panel, survey-based estimation model to be used quarterly from 1992 forward.

To preserve the confidentiality of individual company responses, a market research firm collects and tabulates the data and reports only aggregate results to ASA. Survey participants include more than 100 small, medium, and large staffing companies that together provide services in virtually all sectors of the industry and account for nearly half of total U.S. staffing industry sales. The participants provide employment, sales, and payroll data on the most recent quarter and, to ensure validity and continuity, the relevant previous quarters. Responses are stratified by company size and used to derive growth rates for each stratum. Strata for each metric are weighted based on the proportionate market share of similarly sized companies. These growth rates are applied quarter by quarter to aggregate benchmark estimates for temporary and contract staffing employment, sales, and payroll.

ASA Staffing Index

The ASA Staffing Index tracks temporary and contract employment trends. The index survey methodology essentially mirrors that

of the quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey.

ASA Staffing Index values, based on survey results, are typically posted nine days after the close of a given workweek, providing a near real-time gauge of staffing industry employment and overall economic activity.

Participants include a stratified panel of small, medium, and large staffing companies that together provide services in virtually all sectors of the industry and account for more than one-third of U.S. staffing industry establishments and sales. Similar to the quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey, percentage changes in employment are derived by weighting responses according to company size categories.

Two numbers are reported each week. The first is the weekly percentage change in staffing employment. The second is the index value itself, which shows staffing employment trends over time. Both numbers are posted throughout the ASA website, *americanstaffing.net*.

The index is calculated by applying the weekly percentage change in employment to a reference value set at 100 for the week of June 12, 2006. The index reflects the percentage change in employment since that reference week—so when the index reaches 200, staffing employment would have doubled since June 2006. The index does not estimate total industry employment; the quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey provides that data. ASA developed the index with the expertise of the Lewin Group, an economic research firm.

Benchmarks

Both the quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey and the weekly ASA Staffing Index rely on periodic benchmarks from the U.S. Census Bureau. When developing the quarterly survey methodology in 1992, DRI used the 1987 Economic Census of service industries as well as several other sources in estimating industry size

and market share weights—long before the introduction of the North American Industry Classification System.

Data from the 1997 census, the first to use NAICS, more clearly delineated “temporary help services” than the Standard Industrial Classification it replaced. Using the 1997 NAICS-based census also provided better comparability and continuity of data for the 1990 to 2002 period than the original DRI estimates, particularly given that the principal interest in the results of the quarterly survey has been changes over time rather than absolute levels of employment, sales, and payroll.

Data from the 2002 census were used as benchmarks for the quarterly survey results from 2002 through 2006, while the 2007 census data were used to benchmark quarterly survey results from 2007 to present.

The 2007 census data were also used as benchmarks for the index back to 2006; 2006 and 2007 were peak—and similar—years for the staffing industry, and the index covered only the last six and a half months of 2006, which were much more like 2007 than 2002, the previous census year (and hence the next available benchmark).

In 2011, given newly released benchmark data from the 2007 U.S. Economic Census, ASA revised historical figures for staffing employment, sales, and payroll back to 1990 and ASA Staffing Index values to the index's inception in 2006.

The 2012 census core business statistics comparative data are scheduled for release in June 2016. ASA will rebenchmark the quarterly survey and index at that time.

Comparison With BLS

ASA and BLS have similar—but different—survey methodologies. The ASA quarterly survey and weekly index generally track BLS monthly employment trends. However, because ASA benchmarks to the U.S. Economic Census and BLS uses its own benchmarks, each organization draws different conclusions on total staffing employment. Moreover, BLS season-

ally adjusts its data—and makes numerous revisions—while ASA does not seasonally adjust, and makes revisions only every five years when benchmark census data become available. Further complicating comparison, BLS counts corporate employees of staffing firms along with temporary employees, and it is unclear if or where contract employees are captured. ASA counts only temporary and contract employees. As a point of comparison, BLS showed nonseasonally adjusted temporary help employment averaging 3.07 million in December 2014⁴⁰; ASA counted 3.40 million in the fourth quarter of 2014⁴¹—a difference of approximately 10%, not taking into account the inclusion of corporate employees and possible exclusion of some contract employees in the BLS number. After the annual benchmark process at the beginning of this year, BLS revised its December 2014 temporary help employment average down to 2.96 million⁴²—widening the difference from the ASA count to nearly 15%.

Research and Corporate Partners

The quarterly ASA Staffing Employment and Sales Survey and the weekly ASA Staffing Index are administered by ASA corporate partner Inavero, and sponsored by ASA corporate partner CareerBuilder, the exclusive research partner of the American Staffing Association.



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