

When You See a Statistic, Look Deeper

By Amy Lindgren

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When you hear statistics, what is your default response? For me, it's cynicism. For reasons I can't even define, I've always had an 'I bet' reaction when someone argues a point by presenting a statistic.

My second reaction is to turn the number around and look at its opposite. Seven percent unemployment? That must mean 93 percent employment — that's not too bad. What's all the fuss about? I even said something to that effect in a column a few weeks ago, and only caught myself after it was too late to call the column back. They don't stop the presses for stuff like that, you know.

So for the record, 7 percent unemployment doesn't mean 93 percent employment. It doesn't even mean seven out of 100 people are unemployed. In the United States, we use our unemployment rate to count people who are available to work (labor force participants) who are currently seeking employment. But it does not count "discouraged workers" — those who have stopped looking. Nor does it count people who did not seek work during the four weeks preceding a survey, due perhaps to family or school commitments.

To confuse matters even more, unemployment numbers haven't always been calculated the same way. We have more informative numbers now that can be sliced to allow more analysis, but the improvements make some headaches when attempting an apples-to-apples comparison.

So is unemployment the worst since ...? I don't know. Somebody probably does, but I have a hard time getting excited about the information, given my overall cynicism about statistics in general.

I prefer to focus on the old saw that says it doesn't matter what the national unemployment rate is — if it's 100 percent in your house, you've got a serious problem. The solution? Look for work. If the market isn't kind to your efforts, the next solution is to look for different work, or to look for work differently.

At what point would the solution be to give up looking? When the national unemployment rate is 10 percent? Twenty? If you need money, the answer would have to be "never." At no point can you give up looking for work, if you really and truly need it. So why look at the statistics at all, unless you're an economic planner?

Over the years I've run into, and occasionally used, other common job search statistics. At the risk of goring someone's ox, including my own, here is a peek behind the curtain.

1. "It takes one month of job search for every \$10,000 in salary you wish to make." Nah — if that were the case, how would you explain all the IT workers who used to get \$80,000 jobs in a day or two?

I don't know when that statistic was true, if ever, but it makes no sense in our modern market. With this logic, it would take two months to find a \$20,000 job. Maybe, but probably not. In truth, salary is just one predictor of the length of a job search.

The field itself, your skills and experience all play a part — as does the effort you apply to the search.

2. "A successful job search takes 40 hours a week." Apparently not, since almost no one puts in 40 hours and people continue to be hired. I think this number is used more as a motivator by career counselors than as a statement of fact. They wish to convey that you need to invest serious effort, and the 40-hour workweek is a handy guideline.

I once saw a study tracking the actual hours put in by job seekers and the result was shocking, even to me. Not 40, or even 20 hours a week — these folks were averaging something closer to six. Ouch. In my experience, 20 hours a week used strategically will work fine. Six? Probably not.

3. "Eighty to 95 percent of open positions are not advertised." This is my ox. I have seen several studies over the years and they convince me that vastly more positions are "hidden" than known. For starters, every position is hidden at least until it is announced.

But here's the problem: Few of these studies incorporate Internet advertising.

We have other numbers that track Internet job search, but they are not as conclusive as the statistics derived from simply counting ads in the newspaper and correlating the results with random surveys of employers. I miss those days.

If I miss those days, you probably do too. In fact, I'd bet that 35 to 60 percent of all job seekers miss those days See how these things get started?

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