

Facing our job lot

On the surface, this week's job numbers are good news. But scratch a little deeper and you'll find many casualties of the global financial crisis, writes **Paul Syvret**

'If a factory hand position comes up you will get at least 30 to 50 applying'

STATISTICS have all-too-human faces. Wayne Archer is one of them. When you haven't worked for almost a year, economic data showing Australia's unemployment rate appears to have peaked and is now heading south is almost irrelevant.

For the 640,000 Australians still out of work, official labour force numbers showing a jobless rate of "only" 5.5 per cent don't pay the rent, put food on the table or restore self-esteem battered by constant rebuffs from potential employers.

Not when you are one of the numbers.

The quietly spoken Archer has had a tough working life – a boilermaker's trade is like that.

His back isn't what it used to be and the demanding physical labour has damaged his carpal (wrist) nerves.

After an operation three years ago, he just couldn't physically do it any more.

As the 47-year-old Woodridge resident puts it: "I've got old age from boilermaking."

Things were booming then, and even in areas of traditionally high unemployment like the southern outskirts of Brisbane, there were jobs for those who wanted to work.

"I told my boss I was no longer up to it and my boilermaking days were behind me, but he was great," Archer says.

"Straight away he got me a job as a storeman and process worker operating machinery."

Then the economy fell over, and the global financial crisis aftershocks rippled through places such as the Crestmead Industrial Estate.

"We went from shipping 100 tonnes of steel a day to maybe 25 or 30 tonnes a day. They had to retrench a lot of blokes.

"I was in the older crowd and when you have a heap of 20-year-old men in the same place with more qualifications, well . . ."

Like so many people of his generation, age and education are also issues.

"I've been told by a lot of places – always off the record, of course – that I am just too old."

It's not for want of trying. Archer estimates he has applied for more than 100 positions – everything from truck driving to storeroom jobs –

since March. From those applications he's been granted just one interview.

As so many people looking for a trade did in the 1970s, Archer left school young, and says his literacy isn't what it could be. So in the absence of work he's studying English, maths and basic computing at TAFE.

"Being in your 40s and not knowing what a computer is doesn't help. Until last year I thought a mouse was something with four legs."

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Stories like Wayne Archer's fall within the purview of men such as John Bridge, the manager of the Logan branch of Sarino Russo Job Access, part of the Federal Government's Job Services Australia network.

Bridge is a veteran of the employment services sector, having started off with the old Commonwealth Employment Service 30 years ago.

He's seen more than his share of recessions and the impact it can have on the lives behind the statistics.

This one, though, hit very rapidly.

"It was the first quarter of last year – it was quite dramatic, it was really quite quick," he says.

Scroll back 18 months to two years, before the US mortgage market threatened to bring the whole global financial system crashing down, and Bridge says there was "a plentiful supply of jobs".

Now, he says, the competition for unskilled jobs is fierce.

"If a position for a factory hand comes up you will get at least 30 to 50 people applying for it."

In areas such as Logan, with a high migrant population, low rental costs and a relatively high

level of public housing, demand for unskilled positions will always be strong.

"It's pretty typical of any outer suburb in any Australian city, really."

But according to Bridge, conditions seem to be improving.

"There's definitely more optimism out there now, but certainly not the number of positions for the stock of people we have."

The human face of unemployment is far more complicated than resumes and the paperwork of bureaucracy, with Bridge describing part of a Job Services Australia provider's task as "almost a social work role", particularly when it comes to clients requiring a higher level of assistance.

"We have some clients who don't have food to put on the table, or where there are issues of homelessness, medical conditions or drug or alcohol problems."

For others – and this is a particular problem in outer urban areas – access to transport (or lack of it) is a big problem.

"When you're unemployed, a car is often one of the first expenses to be cut," Bridge says.

"We can help with everything from referrals to food banks to counselling services, to assisting people financially with train fares or putting enough petrol in the car to get them to an interview or allow them to travel to a new job until they get paid."

Ultimately, Bridge believes that, with some exceptions, the great Australian dole-bludger "is something of a myth". "The problem is people get disillusioned. They lose their confi-

dence and self-esteem.

“A large part of our job can be about getting people ready for work.”

But the search for work isn't limited to those on the jobless queues.

Even for those people in employment, the recent Australian Bureau of Statistics' labour force numbers have a sobering message about underemployment – where people want more hours of work than they have.

These may be the workers who were shifted from full-time to part-time positions during the downturn, or who have seen what were regular overtime shifts disappear and are now struggling to make ends meet.

The latest numbers list 895,000 (or 7.8 per cent of the workforce) as under-employed, partly as a result of the rapid rise in part-time positions in recent years as employers seek labour force flexibility.

Add these to those with no work and you have what is known as the labour force under-utilisation rate, which now is at 13.5 per cent – meaning 1.4 million eligible Australians either have no work, or not enough.

The figures are worse in Queensland, where 8.8 per cent of the workforce is classed as underemployed.

For female workers north of the Tweed things are worse again, with 10.6 per cent of the workforce underemployed.

These people, too, are the struggling faces behind the statistics, as much as Wayne Archer and the more than 1000 other Logan Job Access clients John Bridge has on his books.

For Archer though, the key is optimism.

“I'm not looking for ‘the’ job any more,” he says. “I'm not after the big dollars.

“I'm applying at places like Bunnings because they'll often take older men on the basis of their trade skills.”

Though it's a sad employment market when “older” can mean a man who has 20 years of working life left before he even qualifies for the age pension.



SQUEEZED OUT: Wayne Archer says he 'got old age from boilermaking' and has since joined the ranks of the unemployed in Queensland. **Picture: Derek Moore**