



What's Good and Bad About Temp Work

What you need to know before signing up with an agency

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Even in good times, job-hopping is normal in this country. But with a slumping economy and anxiety about job security, [temporary employment agencies](#) are seeing a rise in applicants.



(Reza Estakhrian/Stone/Getty Images)

After six straight months of private-sector job losses, if you're looking for a job, you're not alone. Temp agencies are often the place to jump-start your search. They provide an option for those who have growing gaps in their résumés and those who are looking for extra money without entering (or going back) into the workforce full time.

McKinsey Quarterly called hiring temps, or "tapping into the world of talent," the third top business technology trend to watch as companies increasingly parcel out "more work to specialists, free agents, and talent networks." The American Staffing Association reports that temporary and contract staffing agencies employed 2.96 million people each day and 11.4 million individuals over the course of 2007.

For workers, temping can be the difference between getting by and not. But before you walk into an agency office, there are some things you should know about when to temp and when it's better not to.

The Upside

Filling gaps: If you have a blank-slate résumé or a growing gap in employment dates, temp agencies provide a way to fill them. Elizabeth Freedman, who runs a Boston career development and communications firm, says temp agencies can "help newbies get a foot in the door to a wide range of companies."

Taking those positions can say more about you than you think. "Employers are experiencing the Y generation and millennials as having the attitude that tasks are 'below' them. By doing temp work, it indicates a good attitude and work ethic that is desperately sought by employers in their workforce," says Michelle Tillis Lederman, founder of Executive Essentials, a corporate training and coaching company.

Return from retirement: On the flip side of career experience, as the newly retired struggle to piece together their finances, they increasingly seek temp positions—a happy medium between full-time work and full-time retirement. Temp agencies say they are welcome. "The graying workforce," says Chuck Ray, the Washington, D.C., regional director of temp giant [Manpower](#), is becoming "more attractive to employers as they bring acumen and judgment to jobs."

Moving moms and dads: When a couple moves for one to take a job, the other often temps while looking for permanent work in the new location. Sue Shellenbarger of the *Wall Street Journal*, who blogs about women in business, notes the increasing use of an alternative to the usual temp gig: the "returnship." This is a temporary eight-week position structured like an internship. Returnships, which started to gain popularity in 2004, are aimed at higher-level workers and directed to fix the "damaging 'brain drain' caused by talented mothers and others opting out of fast-track careers," Shellenbarger writes. Even if you're not manager material, though, temp jobs can ease relocation job woes.

"Talent crunch": Manpower's Ray says the hardest jobs to fill right now are in retail, accounting, and healthcare. Workers who are "unflappable," able to deal with customers with ease, and also have a bit of technical savvy are always in "huge demand," he says. It's a mix of "presentation" (i.e. looking put-together) and high-tech skills that get the better jobs, Ray says. Temping candidates with those skills are always needed and easy to place, he says.

The Downside

Probably not permanent: "In reality, no job is permanent or secure," says Michael Neece, chief strategy officer for [PongoResume](https://www.pongoresume.com), an online site that helps people write résumés and cover letters. In a shaky job market, temp agencies can cut out the legwork and quickly connect you with the right job. But even as many temps hope to stay on as a permanent worker, most don't. "Often people will go to temp agencies believing it's the path to a full-time job," says Deborah Bailey, a career and life transition coach who writes for [WomenforHire.com](https://www.womenforhire.com). "It's best to look at temp work as just that—temporary."

Too much temping: Jack Manning, president of the Boston temp agency Manning Associates, says, "I burrow into the marketplace pretty deeply to find good people." But there are still times, for both workers and agencies, when it's "smarter to pass," Manning says. Some people, anxious about the job market, may try to grab up a temp job for just a week before starting at a permanent position. Manning says when this happens it's almost certainly "going to let somebody down and leave both sides in the lurch."

A means, not an end: It's good to start with temp agencies, but some workers can get stuck there. "Temp agencies shouldn't be the only source an active job seeker utilizes," says Emy Yamauchi-Wong of Honolulu's ALTRES (Alternative Resources for Business) Staffing, "but they are definitely a partner in looking out for the hidden job opportunities that they have access to." After all, temp agencies thrive on the fees they receive for placing you, and most receive a percentage of your hourly wage as long as you stay.