BUSINESS

Jobs openings at 16-month high

Private employers seeking more workers could be positive signal

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WASHINGTON — Job openings jumped in April to the highest level in 16 months, a sign that private employers may boost hiring in coming months.

The number of jobs advertised at the end of April rose to 3.1 million from 2.8 million in March, the Labor Department said Tuesday. That's the most since December 2008.

Private employers accounted for the entire net gain. The government's advertising for jobs decreased, despite the hiring of hundreds of thousands of census workers in May.

The department's report, called the Job Openings and Labor Turnover survey, follows a disappointing employment report Friday that found private employers added only 41,000 jobs in May. Temporary census hiring accounted for 411,000 jobs.

Job openings have risen by about 740,000 since bottoming out at 2.3 million in July. But they remain far below pre-recession levels of about 4.5 million openings per month.

The competition for jobs remains tough. There were 5 unemployed people, on average, for each job opening in April. That's down from 5.4 in March, but well above pre-recession levels of 1.8 jobless workers per opening.

Other surveys show companies are likely to increase hiring, though at a slow pace. Staffing company Manpower Inc. said Tuesday its quarterly outlook found more employers are planning to hire in the July-to-September quarter than the preceding three months.

Manpower said its employment index rose to a seasonally adjusted 6 percent, a point higher than in the March-to-June period.

Separately, the National Federation of Independent Business said Tuesday its small business optimism index rose to 92.2. That's the highest level since September 2008.

Its employment index rose to 1, the first positive reading in 19 months, suggesting more small businesses plan to add workers than cut them.