Spring's job slump not so bad by comparison to last year

BY PAUL WISEMAN
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WASHINGTON — Two straight months of disappointing job growth have raised fears that the U.S. economy is stalling for the third year in a row.

But don't despair just yet: This year's slowdown is an improvement on last year's, which was an improvement on the year before's.

Consider:

— Hiring decelerated to an average 135,000 a month in March and April. That was slower than the December-February pace of 252,000 a month, but still a solid six-digit gain each month.

— During last year's slowdown, from May through August, job growth came in below 100,000 for four straight months. The average was 80,000 jobs a month.

In 2010, the slowdown, from June through September, consisted of four straight months of job losses. The average loss was 76,000.



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In this Wednesday photo, Mi-Ran Park-Wong, of Macy's, speaks to a job applicant during a career expo sponsored by Jobs Direct USA in Orlando, Fla. The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits rose last week to a five-week high, evidence that the job market remains sluggish.

Each year, the slowdown has been at a significantly higher level than the year before.

The previous two years, the economy has endured a series of shocks. Europe's debt troubles undermined consumer and business confidence in 2010. Last year, Middle East unrest sent oil prices surging. An earthquake and tsunami in Japan cut off supplies to many U.S. manufacturers. A political clash in Washington over the federal borrowing limit nearly forced the U.S. government to default and rattled consumers and businesses.

The economy has dodged such blows in 2012. A run-up in gasoline prices appears to be easing just in time for the summer driving season. More than 1.8 million Americans have been hired over the past year.

Those gains feed on themselves. More people with paychecks means more spending on goods and services, which can lead companies to hire even more.