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In this recent file photo, Maria Aplington, from United Parcel Service, helps Craig Wooten, of Portland, Ore., navigate their website during a hiring event for UPS at WorkSource Oregon, in Portland. The unemployment rate fell last month to its lowest level in more than 2-and-a-half years.

Unemployment drops

Jobless rate drops to lowest since 2009

BY CHRISTOPHER S. RUGABER
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WASHINGTON — The unemployment rate, which has refused to budge from the 9 percent neighborhood for 2 ⅓ frustrating years, suddenly dropped in November, driven in part by small businesses that finally see reason to hope and hire.

Economists said there was a long way to go but liked what they saw.

The rate fell to 8.6 percent, the lowest since March 2009, two months after President Barack Obama took office. Unemployment passed 9 percent that spring and had stayed there or higher for all but two months since then.

The country added 120,000 jobs in November, the Labor Department said Friday. The economy has generated 100,000 or more jobs five months in a row — the first time that has happened since April 2006, well before the Great Recession.

"Something good is stirring in the U.S. economy," Ian Shepherdson, an economist at High Frequency Economics, said in a note to clients.

The report showed that September and October were stronger months for the job market than first estimated. For four months in a row, the government has revised job growth figures higher for previous months.

Unemployment peaked at 10.1 percent in October 2009, four months after the Great Recession ended. It dipped to 8.9 percent last February and 8.8 percent last March but otherwise was at or above 9 percent.

Inside the unemployment report, one of the most closely watched indicators of the economy's health, were signs of improvement for small businesses, which account for one of every two jobs in the private sector.

The government uses a survey of mostly large companies and government agencies to determine how many jobs were added or lost each month. It uses a separate survey of households to determine the unemployment rate. The household survey picks up hiring by companies of all sizes, including small businesses and companies just getting off the ground.