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Less Joblessness, Smaller Raises

New Data Carry Good News and Bad for D.C. Area Workers

By [V. Dion Haynes](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, September 2, 2009

Washington area employees can expect lower raises, fewer signing bonuses and less premium pay for security clearances this year, but at least their jobs may be safer than elsewhere in the country.

That's the picture emerging from a survey to be released Wednesday of 300 employers in the region, along with the latest government unemployment data.

For the first time in the past five years, Washington area employers as a whole are decreasing the amount set aside for raises -- to a median of 3.5 percent this year, compared with 4 percent the previous four years. The figures come from the 30th annual compensation survey prepared by the Human Resource Association of the National Capital Area, based on data gathered in February from employers at financial services companies, government agencies, contracting firms, hospitals, hotels and nonprofit associations.

And, according to figures Tuesday from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the jobless rate in the region decreased to 6.2 percent in July from 6.5 percent in June, suggesting that Washington has taken its hits but is still in much better shape than most of the nation, where the non-seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate is 9.7 percent.

Both reports paint a nuanced picture of the region. The latest raises in Washington, while lower, are above the 3 percent that employers nationwide projected for 2010 in a Conference Board survey released Tuesday. Still, the trend in parts of the region's private sector has been to slash jobs and offer generous raises and bonuses to a smaller group of workers who are considered the highest performers, and in the public sector to cut wages through furloughs.

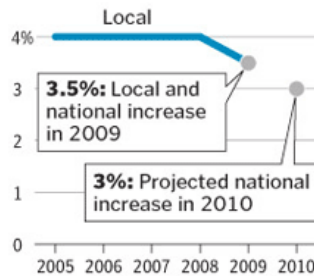
And that, according to some experts, portends a less robust recovery. The stingy raises mean many workers will have less discretionary income to spend on the goods and services that could spur hiring and the creation of new jobs.

Worker Trends

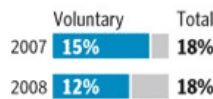
A survey of more than 300 employers in the region illustrates the effects that the weak job market and uncertainty about the economy have had on employees.

Companies budgeted less for **pay increases** for all employee groups in 2009.

MEDIAN PAY INCREASES



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Signing bonuses are falling out of favor.



NOTE: The survey, taken in February, covers job sites in the Washington-Baltimore-Northern Virginia-D.C. area.

SOURCE: Human Resource Association of the National Capital Area

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"More employers are deciding they may freeze or give lower raises. That translates into fewer people getting raises," said Cara Carter, chairwoman of the human resources association's compensation survey.


"With increased pension costs [for some government contractors] and a decrease in defense spending, there could still be rougher times ahead and more modest salary increases in the future," she added.

Widespread hiring freezes lessened the need for signing bonuses. Last year, 34 percent of employers surveyed said they offered them, compared with 41 percent the year before.

Many employers are focusing their limited resources on employees in the most crucial jobs. For instance, in a compilation of 10 jobs widely held at typical companies and organizations, database administrators ranked highest in the size of their raises -- 9.7 percent. Marketing managers ranked No. 2, with 6.7 percent, a reflection of companies' efforts to reposition themselves in the new economy, experts said.

By contrast, executive secretaries received an average raise of 2.1 percent and recruiters even less -- 1 percent -- reflecting a diminished role in light of hiring freezes.

"Overall, there's less money for raises and bonuses, forcing organizations to be more selective in who gets them," said Cynthia Ward, president of the human resources association. "This is really a time to perform. This is your time to shine at work."

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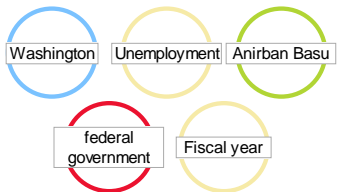
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Less Joblessness, Smaller Raises

In the government data released Tuesday, the Washington region, with its 6.2 percent unemployment rate in July, ranked among the lowest in joblessness. The metropolitan region with the lowest rate was Bismarck, N.D. -- 3.1 percent -- and the highest was El Centro, Calif., with 30 percent unemployment.

Anirban Basu, chairman and chief executive of Sage Policy Group, a Baltimore economic and policy consulting firm, said the sting of smaller raises is somewhat cushioned by lower consumer prices -- a decrease of 2.1 percent over the past year. "Gas prices have fallen significantly, and so have other items, including food," said Basu, who was not involved in the compensation survey. "Home prices have fallen and mortgage rates have fallen, so the reduction in raises doesn't look so devastating."

The Washington region has been bolstered by the federal government and contracting firms, which have added jobs amid the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. But salaries in those sectors are projected to be hit.

Raises in the federal government, which over the next few years is expected to hire hundreds of thousands of new workers, are down to 4.2 percent from 4.8 percent last year. And President Obama, citing the burgeoning deficit, has indicated that raises for federal employees will be frozen at 2 percent next fiscal year.

Workers with high-security clearances are now less likely to receive premium pay. This year, 51 percent of employers were offering premiums, compared with 57 percent last year. Researchers attributed that to signals sent by the government of a possible decrease in defense spending, a move that also could hurt numerous local contracting firms.

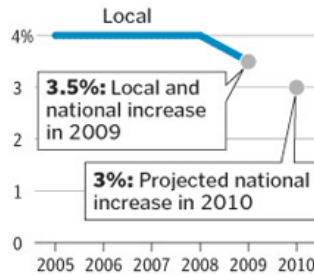
Employers reported raises in the single digits for hundreds of job classifications. But salaries in some other jobs are expected to experience dramatic increases or decreases. For instance, the average salary rose 23 percent for computer system administrators, to \$73,900 from \$60,100, and plunged 20 percent for library assistants, to \$29,100 from \$36,400.

Worker Trends

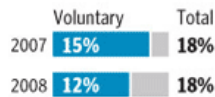
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Angelo Kostopoulos, president of Akron Inc., a District-based firm that compiled the compensation study, said the biggest jumps in salary occurred in high-demand jobs.

The large pay decreases occurred, he added, when employers opted to replace high-paid people who departed with new hires earning much less money.

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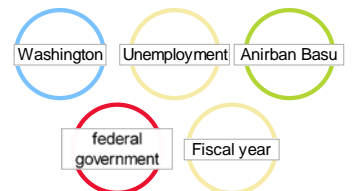
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
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