

Central Texas' job numbers reach positive territory

Area remains in better shape than other big Texas cities

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The Austin area added about 800 jobs last month as the region slowly climbed out of the recession's job slump.

Central Texas gained jobs in April at an annual rate of 0.1 percent compared with the same month last year. That rate was better than those posted by other major Texas cities: Houston, San Antonio and Dallas lost jobs at annual rates of 1.6, 1.2 and 0.4 percent, respectively.

Statewide, Texas continues to fare better than much of the rest of the country with an 8.3 percent unemployment rate, versus the national rate of 9.9 percent for April. Texas added nonagricultural jobs for the fourth straight month, gaining 32,500 such jobs in April, for a total of 79,000 this year.

Austin is weathering the recession better than cities like Dallas and Houston, partly because Austin has some of the best "fundamentals" in the country, said Ed Friedman, a director at Moody's Economy.com who covers the Texas economy. Those fundamentals include strong population growth and a well-educated base. Plus, he said, the city continues to market itself effectively to high-tech industries as a low-cost alternative to California.

"I think these are the reasons why Austin looks good," Friedman said.

Central Texas' unemployment rate of 7 percent in April was down slightly from 7.1 percent in March.

Sam Houston, office partner with HPI Real Estate Services and Investments Inc., said that local companies are starting to add office space and that momentum has continued to build this year.

Recently, Houston said, his company leased additional office space to two companies. In July 2009, those companies occupied a total of about 50,000 square feet of space. Today, that total is up to 125,000 square feet, he said.

"So we are seeing growth," he said.

Keith Phillips, a senior economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, said Austin has been adding jobs at a 3.1 percent rate since December, which is the best of the largest metropolitan areas in the state. And high-tech industries are "leading us out" of the recession in terms of overall exports from the state, he said.

"Of course, when you think of high-tech, you think of Austin," Phillips said.

Local tech companies like chip designer Silicon Laboratories Inc. say they're hiring — 15 people, in Silicon Labs' case.

The company, which employs about 500 people locally, has accelerated hiring since the fourth quarter last year, said Shannon Pleasant, a company spokeswoman, who credited a "healthy demand environment" for the new hires.

"Customers are now behaving in a more normal fashion, in terms of what they're ordering," she said.

Chip company Advanced Micro Devices Inc., which reported an unexpected profit last month, is hiring for more than 200 positions in Austin.

"We believe any improvement in the economy would be like a tide lifting all boats, but what will really drive hiring for AMD is deepening our relationships with our customers," company spokesman Michael Silverman said.

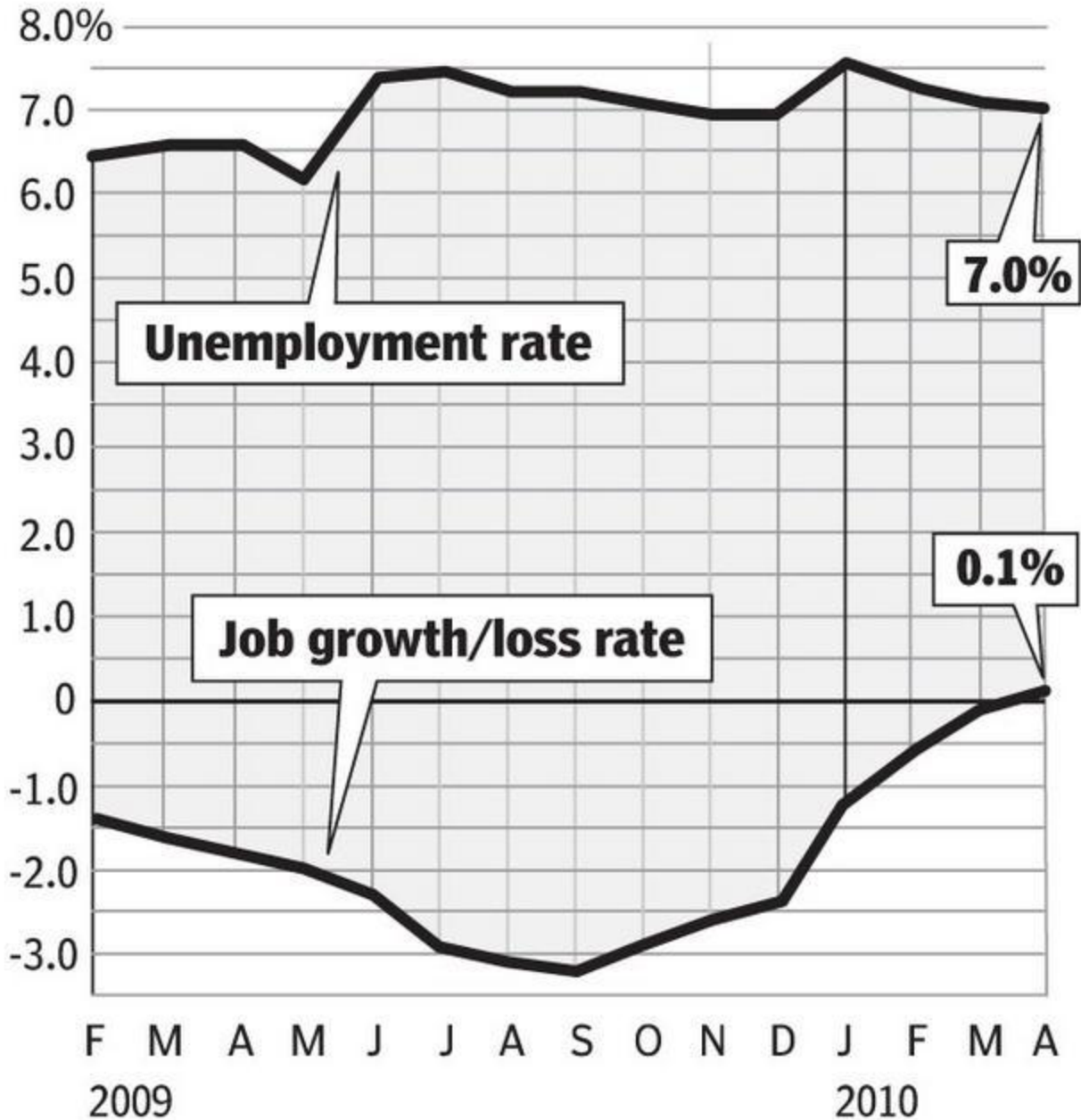
Another company adding jobs is Inova Labs Inc., a 15-employee medical device manufacturer that produces a portable oxygen concentrator. After recently receiving \$10 million in venture capital, the company plans to add 75 people this year as it prepares to introduce its product in the national and global markets, company President and CEO David Shockley said.

With the job market still rebounding, it's a good time to be looking for talent, he said.

"There are wonderful people out there right now that are very experienced, very well-skilled, and they're very available," he said.

Austin job numbers improving

The area saw a small increase in jobs in April.



Source: Texas Workforce Commission

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