U.S. Employers Post More Jobs, Cut Fewer Workers

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WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. employers advertised more job openings in January, suggesting that hiring will remain healthy in the coming months.

Job openings rose 2.2 percent in January from December to 3.69 million, the Labor Department said Tuesday. Openings had fallen nearly 5 percent in December. They are still below November's level of nearly 3.8 million.

There were other positive signs: Employers laid off the fewest workers in January than in any month since records began in 2001. And the number of Americans quitting their jobs rose to the highest in more than four years. People usually quit when they have another job, so more quitting suggests it is easier to find work.

There is still a lot of competition for open positions. About 12.3 million people were unemployed in January. That means there were 3.3 unemployed people, on average, competing for each job. In a healthy economy, that ratio is roughly 2 to 1.

Rising openings and quits add to recent evidence that the job market is getting better.

Employers added 236,000 jobs in February, the government said Friday. That pushed the unemployment rate down from 7.9 percent in January to a four-year low of 7.7 percent last month.

The pace of hiring has accelerated, a sign that employers are confident about their prospects and haven't been discouraged by tax increases or higher gas prices.

Monthly job gains averaged more than 200,000 from November through February. That compares with an average of 154,000 jobs from July through October and only 108,000 from April through June.

Strong auto sales and a steady housing recovery are spurring more hiring, which could trigger more consumer spending and lead to stronger economic growth. Auto sales rose in January and February after reaching a five-year high in 2012.

A big source of strength has been home sales and residential construction: New-home sales jumped 16 percent in January to the highest level since July 2008. And builders started work on the most homes last year since 2008.

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