

Can you count on a worker shortage?

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While workplace experts agree that the country should soon begin to have more jobs than workers, government statisticians say you can't read too much into the raw numbers.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics warns that you'll be led astray if you try to directly compare the BLS Current Population Survey, which counts U.S. residents working or actively looking for work, and the Current Employment Survey, which polls the nation's employers to arrive at a count of jobs. Projections have been done on both through 2010.

Simple subtraction of the numbers for the year 2010 would lead you to believe there will be 10 million more jobs than workers, but the BLS says it's not that easy because a comparison does not accurately account for statistical and other differences, including multiple job holders.

"Any interpretation of BLS employment projections that implies there will be more jobs than persons to fill them is incorrect and based on a misunderstanding of the underlying data," the BLS said in March. Roger Herman, co-author of a book whose premise is based on the 10-million worker shortage number, contends the BLS is splitting hairs.

While they agree that a worker shortage is coming, other workforce authorities are less convinced about the actual number.

"Without question, it's going to be a phenomenon," said Neil Lebovits, president of global consulting and specialty staffing company Ajilon. "Will it happen in the way a lot of books are saying it's going to happen? That's another issue. But a lot of people think the worker shortage of the late '90s was a one-time aberration and we're telling them, think again."