

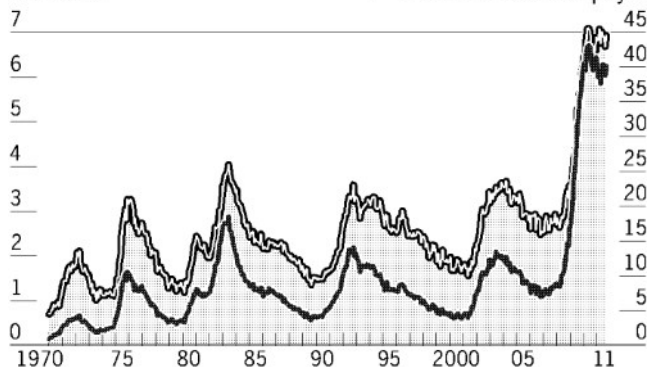
# US unemployed pin hopes on learning new skills

**US long-term unemployment**

Jobless for 27 weeks or more

Million —

— As a % of total unemployed



## Flexibility

Retraining is ever more vital as the march of technology reduces the workforce, writes **Sheila McNulty**

When Halliburton, the US oil services company, held a jobs fair for 40 high-level positions last week, several hundred former Nasa employees showed up. It was standing room only in the packed conference room and dozens could not get in the door.

"All of these people have many, many years of experience," says Leland Jackson, laid off in August from the space agency's shuttle programme. "There's a lot of competition."

The economic downturn ended Nasa's shuttle programme, eliminating the careers many applicants had spent a lifetime building. Their need for retraining is not unique: with 9.1 per cent of the US workforce unemployed and the latest government plan to spur job creation voted down in the Senate on Tuesday night, learning new skills has become crucial to securing work.

The hope of the 7,000 Nasa staffers, along with many others being laid off, is that their skills are transferable and, with on-

the-job training, they can move into still thriving sectors such as the oil and natural gas industry.

The structural shift in the US labour market has eliminated large numbers of jobs. Many have been lost to foreign countries with cheaper costs. The reception desks at many companies are no longer staffed. Instead, a number is posted to dial for service: call in and, more often than not, a computer answers.

Sue Burnett, founder of Burnett Staffing Specialists, says she received a call from a law firm recently laying off the 16 receptionists it had on eight floors: "The phone answering machine has pretty much replaced three-fourths of the receptionists in the workplace."

Technology also has enabled law firms to reduce paralegals, as it is easy for lawyers to fill in blanks on software packages for basic services, such as drafting wills.

"Technology is replacing a lot of jobs," Ms Burnett says.

The constant advance of technology means someone unemployed a year or more, of which there are an estimated 4.5m in the US, will find skills outdated. "It's difficult for them to get back into the market," says Dane Groeneveld, regional director for NES Global, the staffing consultancy.

Instead of retraining a mid-level or senior staffer, many companies prefer college students they can count on for years to come he says.

Royal Dutch Shell is increasingly funding the education of those in technical fields to build its workforce. It paid for Christina Smith's second year of college as she obtained an associate's degree in process technology. When she graduated at the end of 2010, Shell hired her.

"If you put in the effort, there are definitely people out there willing to help you," Ms Smith says.

Joe Laymon, Chevron's vice-president of human resources, says that since 2008 the oil company has spent more than \$100m on US education to develop "masters at using some of the most sophisticated tools to find hydrocarbons".

Demand for high-level talent is so great that Todd Hoffman, a private equity firm and partner in the human resources service practice at PwC, the consultancy, considered acquiring an educational organisation to provide mid-career training to mathematicians and engineers to retrain them.

A number of organisations are toying with various strategies to fit generalists rapidly into new specialised areas, adds Stan Womack, a director at PwC.

Leonard Torres, operations manager of the Aerospace Transition Center, which helps unemployed aerospace workers, is tailoring study programmes to move workers into other fields.

But with salaries dropping in a soft jobs market and inflation pushing up petrol and other prices, he says people in many professions are opting to stay on unemployment benefit: "The conditions that exist today are worse than I have ever seen them."

The oil and gas industry is the best hope of many, given huge inflows into shale oil and gas fields amid technological breakthroughs.

Halliburton alone is hiring 11,000 people in North America this year. Among them is Fernando Amaton, 64, formerly a parts engineer with Nasa, who was brought on to staff five weeks ago.

"I had the skill set Halliburton needed," Mr Amaton says. "Both aerospace and the oil industry use electronics in extreme conditions, and that is my specialty. But I had to learn a different vocabulary."

*Additional reporting by Robin Harding in Washington*

I disoccupati negli Stati Uniti ripongono le speranze sull'apprendimento di nuove capacità lavorative (pds)

