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While the direct marketing industry continues to be hit by layoffs and hiring freezes, there are signs of some improvement over the recent past, especially on the agency side, according to the latest employment report from Bernhart Associates.

“Overall, hiring levels are still falling but the worst of the job losses may be over,” said Jerry Bernhart, principal at [Bernhart Associates Executive Search LLC](#), in a statement.

A record 265 companies responded to the random survey, which was e-mailed the week of April 6.

According to the report, 16% of responding companies are planning to add to staff during the current second quarter, the lowest percentage since the survey began in 2001. However, the 4% drop in hiring plans was the smallest quarter-to-quarter decline for that indicator in a year.

The employment picture appears to be brightest on the agency side, with 30% of participating agencies planning new hires this quarter. Agencies also are expecting fewer layoffs than their marketing and supplier counterparts.

The news was even better when it comes to planned layoffs, with 13% of all respondents saying they are planning to reduce headcount during the second quarter, down from the 21% reported last quarter.

In terms of hiring freezes, 30% of respondents to the current survey reported a hiring freeze, down sharply from 48% last quarter. The majority of respondents were unable to give a date for when they plan to lift their hiring freezes.

The positions that are expected to be in the greatest demand this quarter are sales, analysts, Web developers, account directors/managers and marketers.

Despite the abundance of direct marketing job seekers on the market, companies still find it challenging filling some open positions. According to the survey, 61% of respondents said they were experiencing either a "somewhat difficult time" or a "very difficult time" filling available openings.