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Highs and lows

BY BEAT KAPPELER

A whirlwind tour of the world of statistics highlights the economic changes occurring in the job market.

STATISTICS ON THE SWISS ECONOMY and Swiss employment over the past 30 years show astonishing upswings in some areas, and only slow movement in others. But their impact is often the same – pure astonishment at the extent of change.

For instance, the number of people employed in industry has declined only slowly in small annual steps. In 1970 industrial workers accounted for 39 percent of all those in employment, in 1985 32 percent, and now just on 26 percent. Because many of this group work in offices, research and sales, employees who actually operate machinery make up only one tenth of the overall number. Equally notable is the decline in the proportion of farmworkers: from 8.6 percent of the population to 7 percent in 1985, and only 4.6 percent today. On the other hand, the service segment rose from 52.4 to 61 percent between 1970 and 1985, to reach the present figure of almost 70 percent.

By contrast, the absolute number of persons in employment has undergone more marked fluctuations. The number of employed dropped by almost ten percent in 1975 alone, rising steeply again in the 1980s only to fall back sharply in the troubled



(Photo: René Ruis)

Thanks to a more favourable economic outlook, consumer spending is also once more on the rise.

1990s and now showing steady growth again over the past three years. As a result the absolute number of persons in employment stagnated between 1970 (just on three million) to 1985, rising again to the present number of almost 4 million. This achievement can only be matched by the American job market, but not by the rest of Europe with its complaints of an “end to employment”.

Non-Swiss were also enlisted in this employment miracle; they, too, personally experienced the highs and lows of the job market. The absolute number of foreigners in employment was 834,000 in 1970, only 756,000 in 1985, and has now risen again to the present 876,000.

Moderate income trend

Incomes have been good, but not in terms of real pay rises. Taking the real income for 1970 as 100, wages rose relatively quickly to 130 by 1985 but now amount to only 140. Several more points need to be deducted from this for taxes and social security con-

tributions compared to former years. This moderate pay rise over the past fifteen years contrasts with Germany, where real income rose dramatically, particularly for unskilled personnel.

Other important trends are missing from the statistics since 1970, due to their relatively recent emergence: The Swiss have saved the equivalent of a national product in pension funds, while Europe's assessment-financed old age pension funds are threatened with imminent demographic bankruptcy.

While the impact of the Internet has only been felt in the past few years, Switzerland now boasts proportionally more Internet users than elsewhere in continental Europe. This latest development is shaping banking, business, knowledge and entertainment more strongly than the bare 30-year statistics seem to indicate. Yet our job market appears to have coped well with these changes over the past three decades and looks equally capable of absorbing future major shifts.

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