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new forecast.

Sep. 25, 2013

Sept. 24—Retailers' annual surge of holiday hiring will be more muted this year, according to a new forecast.

Stores and distribution centers are likely to add 665,800 workers to their head counts from Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas predicts. The bulk of the hires will be made in October.

But that's an 11 percent drop from last year, when 751,800 seasonal workers joined retailers' ranks, sending the measure to a 12-year high. The upswing was the fourth straight annual increase in holiday hiring since 2008, when the number of temporary workers added was the smallest in nearly three decades.

The holiday season makes up a major chunk of annual retail sales — 20 percent by some counts. And this year the period may be even more stressful than usual for companies.

Consumer confidence is wavering, falling to its lowest level since April, according to a recent report from Thomson Reuters and the University of Michigan. ShopperTrak projects a holiday sales increase that would be the smallest since the recession ended.

Retailers are already strategizing, putting holiday plans into gear, pushing Christmas-themed ads into circulation and decorating store space in red and green.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. said Monday that it will hire 55,000 seasonal associates while moving 35,000 current temporary workers to part-time status and another 35,000 employees from part time to full time.

Last year, the mega-chain said it would add more than 50,000 holiday workers.

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But Target said it will hire only 70,000 seasonal employees, 20 percent fewer than in 2012. The retailer said it wanted to give existing workers the chance to claim extra holiday working hours.

“The fact is that retailers are getting smarter about staffing,” said John A. Challenger, chief executive of the Challenger consultancy. “The era of big data has armed everyone with the information they need to more accurately predict the ebbs and flows in sales activity and adjust hiring accordingly.”

The expected overall slide in holiday hiring could also be a consequence of pushes made earlier in the year, the group said. Retailers added 482,000 employees between March and August this year, up 42 percent from the same period in 2012.

And as more consumers turn to the Web to hunt for discounts on products that will often arrive tax-free with no delivery charges, Challenger expects retailers to boost employment at their distribution and customer service facilities — to a point.

“The ongoing shift to Internet shopping could see some seasonal hiring in this area, but the numbers will never match the employment gains seen in traditional brick-and-mortar establishments,” Challenger said.

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