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How to Make a Career Pandemic-Proof

With the economy in flux, people are training for jobs that provide stability, flexibility



Consultant Peter Brooks is applying for jobs inside established companies, starting a new agency and developing new skills in the wake of the pandemic.

PHOTO: ZHEN QIN

By [Lauren Weber](#)

Updated June 30, 2020 11:39 am ET

Workers whose livelihoods have been bruised by the Covid-19 crisis are trying to pandemic-proof their careers.

Peter Brooks's thriving consultancy lost 70% of its business during one week in March as the start-ups he helped with marketing and strategy development hit pause on growth plans. Mr. Brooks, 35 years old, is

now starting a marketing agency with friends and using newfound time on his hands to expand his skills, taking online courses in international entrepreneurship and French, which he said will help with business he is developing in Europe and Rwanda.

“I don’t really see a long runway for me in this field,” he said of his marketing career. “I’m trying to branch out.”

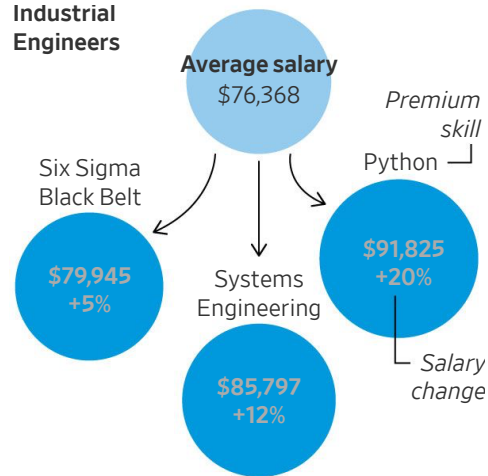
The pandemic has sent shock waves through the labor market, with millions of layoffs and, for those who remain employed, fears of future cuts. In the 2008 recession, long-term unemployment, lasting 26 weeks or more, remained high for years, scarring workers’ psyches and household finances. New technology and evolving skill requirements made it hard for many people to rejoin the labor force even as the economy recovered.

Paths to More Pay

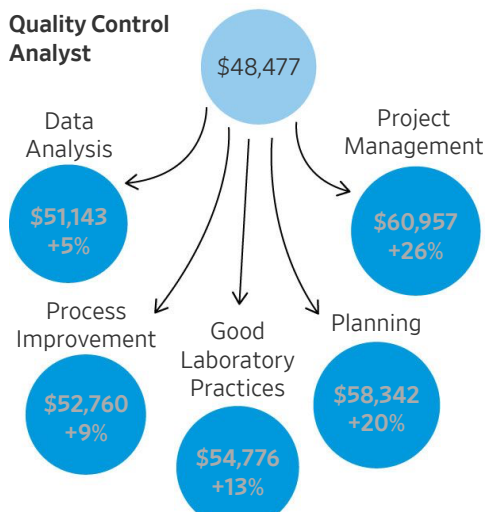
Adding skills during a downturn can yield better job and pay prospects as the economy recovers.

Selected jobs and skills that can lead to a better salary

Industrial Engineers



Quality Control Analyst

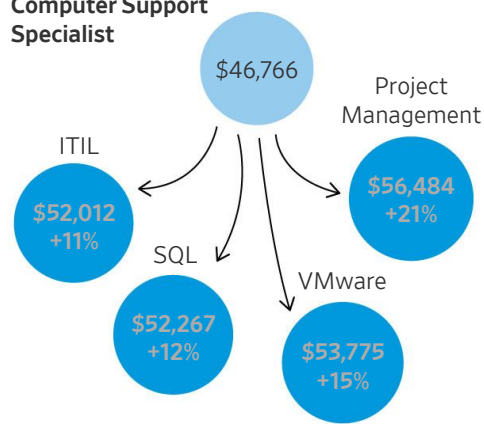


This time around, many workers are trying to forestall that fate, preparing themselves to be employable in the economy’s next incarnation. Use of online learning platforms—many of which weren’t available in the last recession—has soared, and job-training programs are inundated with applicants.

At LinkedIn Learning, downloads of certificate-eligible classes in professions like accounting, project management and information technology have increased more than 600% since February. Enrollment in micro-degrees and professional certificates at EdX, which offers online courses from universities like Harvard and Stanford, have increased by 6 to 15 times their normal rates during the crisis, according to the company.

Robert Aufiero, 36, sold books

Computer Support Specialist



Source: Burning Glass Technologies
Luis Santiago/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

at a Barnes & Noble store in Saugus, Mass., for 13 years before he was furloughed in March. In May, he started a 12-week course in cloud computing through Per Scholas, a nonprofit job-training program. He had applied before the lockdowns began, thinking he needed something with more stability and career opportunities than bookselling. The pandemic made that crystal clear.

“Some jobs are just more critical than others. You want to find yourself in a situation where the stuff you’re doing will always be in demand,” he said.

Firms that lay off workers during a crisis generally don’t hire them back when business improves, economists say. Hard-hit companies often retool operations when demand is down, updating machinery, investing in automation and rethinking how they make products or provide services, said Brad Hershbein, senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

“They experiment with ways to get by, and when conditions get better, they won’t need those same people back if they don’t have the new skill set,” he said.

Skills that offer the possibility of remote work are especially appealing. Roy Pemberton, 40, started a 21-week software-development class in February and was juggling that along with a full-time job building cars at a General Motors Co. plant near Dallas area. He had planned to leave GM and return to his first love, DJ’ing at clubs, while focusing on his studies. A former boss had already agreed to rehire him. The pandemic shut down both jobs.

After he transitions to his new field, “if this was ever to occur again, I’d still be able to maintain a paycheck because I could work from home,” he said.

The demand for job-training programs like Per Scholas and Merit America, which offers Mr. Pemberton’s course, is growing under the new burdens of a recession, corporate cost-cutting and social unrest that are drawing attention to economic inequalities.

Merit America, which provides training to people without bachelor’s

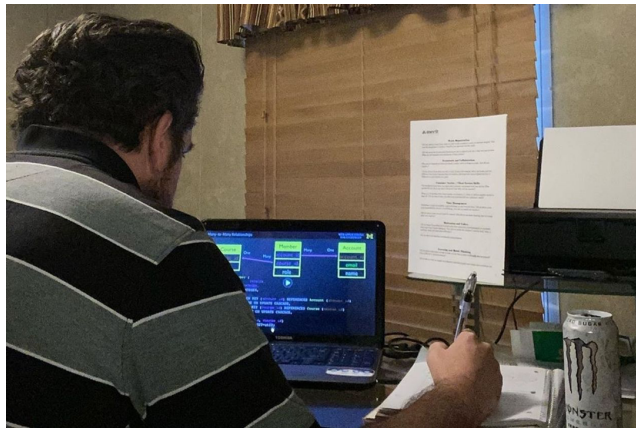


Roy Pemberton wanted to return to DJ'ing.

PHOTO: ROY PEMBERTON

degrees, offers classes in tech support, software development and advanced manufacturing. It received more than 1,000 applications for 60 spots in a course that began in May—nearly triple the demand that the program saw pre-coronavirus, said founder Rebecca Taber.

Many applicants say they have felt stuck in dead-end jobs, and now some find themselves furloughed or going to work in essential front-line roles that put them—and their families—at risk, she said.



Mr. Pemberton started a 21-week software-development class with Merit America in February.

PHOTO: ROY PEMBERTON

Labor-market experts expect to see laid-off workers head for stopgap jobs to keep some income rolling in, especially if Congress chooses not to renew expanded unemployment benefits of \$600 federal dollars a week. Delivery services like Uber Eats and Instacart have continued to add workers, while Amazon.com Inc. and CVS Health Corp., among other retailers, have hired hundreds of thousands.

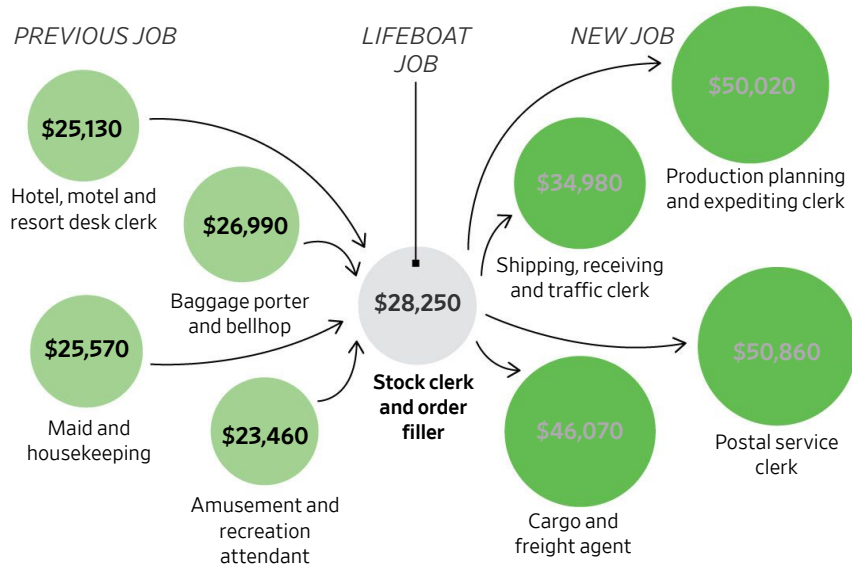
These so-called “lifeboat” jobs often pay less and require fewer skills than the jobs these workers were laid off from, said Matt Sigelman, chief executive of Burning Glass Technologies, a labor-market analysis firm. A software developer may find she needs to take a job doing tech support, he said, or a social worker might become a contact tracer for a health department.

“We know from past recessions that a lot of people step down and then

wind up on the sidelines. They never really get back in or back to where they were,” he said. “If you’re going to get in a lifeboat, you want a map that shows how to get to the closest rescue ships”--in this case, better-paying, higher-skilled jobs.

Into the Lifeboat....and Out

With few choices in a recession, laid-off workers sometimes accept lower-paying jobs. Those jobs can be springboards to better-paying work. Here’s how some so-called lifeboat jobs can lead to better-paying roles.

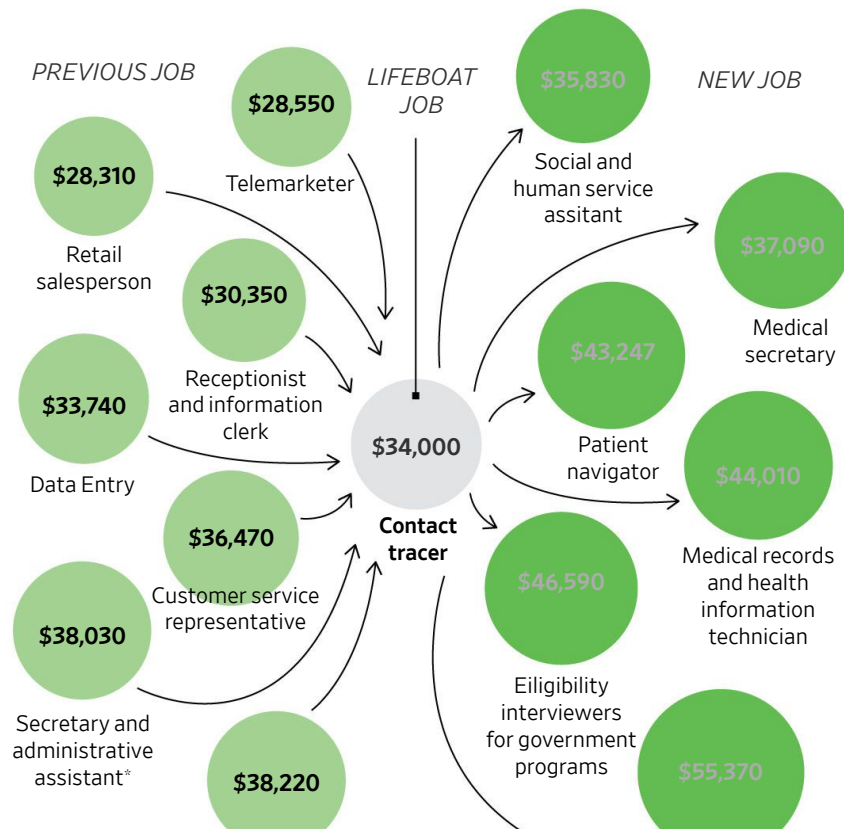


Skills you bring to the 'lifeboat' job

- Customer service
- Scheduling
- Cleaning

Skills you get from the 'lifeboat' job

- Inventory management
- Data entry



Bill and account
collectors

→ Sales representatives,
services, other

Skills you bring to the 'lifeboat' job

Customer service
Data entry
Data collection

Skills you get from the 'lifeboat' job

Medical terminology
Health education
Patient privacy
Record keeping
Patient care
Scheduling

*Excludes legal, medical, and executive
Source: Burning Glass Technologies
Luis Santiago/The Wall Street Journal

People with college degrees may be in particular trouble, said Mr. Sigelman. Data from recent layoffs shows college grads are less likely to have lost a job recently, but among recent job postings, there has been a sharper decline in professional jobs than those requiring less than a bachelor's degree.

More troubling for the long-term recovery, he said, are steep declines in hiring for roles such as engineering and research and development.

New opportunities will rise from the Covid crisis, Mr. Sigelman said. He expects to see a "readiness economy" emerge, where skills aimed at preventing or responding to future crises could be in high demand. Those may include jobs in fields like cybersecurity, health care and supply chain management.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Have you ever had to reinvent yourself or expand your skills in order to keep yourself employable? Share your advice for others. Join the conversation below.

Community colleges, often the first responders when it comes to developing courses for new labor-market needs, typically see enrollments rise during economic downturns, said Paul Osterman, an economist at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Not every worker needs to find a brand-new career. For many occupations, having what Burning Glass dubs "premium skills" can set people up for better-paying jobs when the economy recovers. For example, a health care administrator with project-management skills earns a 16% premium over the typical administrator's salary. A tech support specialist earns 12% more by knowing the SQL database language.

"It's not clear whether those premiums will persist," Mr. Sigelman said. "But acquiring the premium sets of skills will certainly give you a leg up in that field."

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