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The 50 Best Careers of 2011



Alexis Grant, On Monday December 6, 2010, 12:04 am EST

It pays to be smart when choosing your career, particularly now that the job market is (slowly) improving. With the recession officially over, anyone who's out of work or eager to change jobs is on the lookout for opportunities. But where, exactly, are the jobs? Which occupations offer decent salaries, quality of life--and are likely to stick around for the next decade?

Our list of 50 Best Careers answers those questions. We've highlighted dozens of high-opportunity professions--careers you may want to consider as you decide where to look for your next paycheck. Based on job-growth projections, salary data, and other factors like job satisfaction, these occupations span a variety of industries, so you can find the right position for you no matter what your interests.

What's new on the list this year? Several of our picks reflect the recent uptick in the economy, while others are long-time contenders that finally muscled their way onto the roster. With an aging baby boomer generation, healthcare continues to make a strong showing. All of the [healthcare jobs](#) on last year's list have made the cut again this year, plus two new positions: massage therapist and athletic trainer. While the field of athletic training doesn't offer the sheer number of positions as nursing or dental hygiene, it outranks nearly all other healthcare occupations for expected job growth.

[[See Tips for Landing Jobs on Our List.](#)]

[Technology positions](#) also account for a good chunk of our top-choice careers. Computer support specialist joins the ranks this year with upward trending employment numbers. Education administrator, which ranked particularly high for job satisfaction, made it onto our lineup of [social service jobs](#). In the [business category](#), we added sales manager, an occupation that's making a comeback along with the economy.

On our [creative and service jobs](#) list, heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration technician is new this year, largely because of its high expected job growth. Interpreter/translator, an occupation that's increasingly in demand as a result of globalization, also made the cut.

To come up with this year's list, *U.S. News* considered job-growth projections from the Labor Department, estimates for 2008 to 2018, the most recent data available. We narrowed it down to occupations that are expected to add jobs at an above-average rate over the next decade, as well as those that provide an above-average median income. Sales manager makes the highest median annual salary on our list, nearly \$97,000. Computer software engineer, physician assistant, meteorologist and education administrator all bring in median average salaries in the mid-\$80,000 range.

We also considered, where possible, data on job satisfaction, turnover, and impending retirements, which crank up openings in jobs that may have only slightly above-average employment growth. We talked with labor and industry experts as well, gathering anecdotal evidence about employment prospects and job satisfaction. We excluded careers that lack a statistically significant number of positions and therefore provide opportunity for only a small number of workers. When necessary, we favored jobs that would help diversify our list in terms of category and educational requirements, since not everyone wants to work in healthcare or go to school for six years.

[[See 10 Smart Ways to Use Social Media in Your Job Search.](#)]

Most of the jobs that were cut from the list this year showed a higher-than-average unemployment rate or shrinking employment numbers during the last few quarters. From the creative and service jobs category, funeral director, plumber, security system installer, and landscape architect got the boot. In business, we cut market research analyst, loan officer, and cost estimator.

Of course, no one job is best for everyone, and everyone has their own ideas about what makes a job great. "You have to like what you're

doing or you're not going to be successful at it," says Emily Bennington, who helps college graduates transition into careers through her company, Professional Studio 365. At the same time, "if you're not getting paid to do it, you're not going to love it for very long."

Qualities that make a job desirable also change with the times and circumstances. Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, expects his next set of job-satisfaction data to show that workers value stability more than they did before the recession. "Occupations that have greater job stability perhaps have improved in the public's evaluation," he says.

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Even as hiring picks up, the odds can seem daunting to job seekers. In a struggling economy with a 9.6 percent unemployment rate, competition is stiff even for some jobs that made our list. For every job opening in September, there were about five unemployed people, according to the Labor Department. While that's an improvement from 6.2 people for every job opening in November 2009, the most recent peak, "it's still a very tough job market," says Steve Hipple, an economist at the Labor Department. During the three years before the recession, the rate averaged 1.7 unemployed people for every job opening.

Others like John Challenger, CEO of outplacement company Challenger, Gray & Christmas, are more optimistic. "The whole environment has changed," says Challenger, who talks daily with companies that are hiring, as well as job seekers. "(It's) certainly not gang-busters by any means ... but it feels like springtime compared to last year's winter in the job market."

Whether you're out of work or your job has simply fallen out of favor, you'll likely find an occupation on our list that suits you. For each profession, we've offered a summary of what you can expect on the job, as well as advice from hiring managers and people who work in that industry about how to land one.

Here's our list of the 50 Best Careers of 2011--click each job to learn more:

Business Jobs:

- [Accountant](#)
- [Actuary](#)
- [Financial adviser](#)
- [Financial analyst](#)
- [Logistician](#)
- [Meeting planner](#)
- [Public relations specialist](#)
- [Sales manager](#)
- [Training specialist](#)

Creative and Service Jobs:

- [Commercial pilot](#)
- [Curator](#)
- [Film and video editor](#)
- [Gaming manager](#)

--Heating, air conditioning and refrigeration technician

--Interpreter/Translator

--Multimedia artist

--Technical writer

Healthcare Jobs:

--Athletic trainer

--Dental hygienist

--Lab technician

--Massage therapist

--Occupational therapist

--Optometrist

--Physician assistant

--Physical therapist

--Physical therapist assistant

--Radiologic technologist

--Registered nurse

--School psychologist

--Veterinarian

Social Service Jobs:

--Clergy

--Court reporter

--Education administrator

--Emergency management specialist

--Firefighter

--Marriage and family therapist

--Mediator

--Medical and public health social worker

--Special-education teacher

--Urban planner

Technology Jobs:

--Biomedical engineer

--Civil engineer

--Computer software engineer

--Computer support specialist

--Computer systems analyst

--Environmental engineering technician

--Environmental science technician

--Hydrologist

--Meteorologist

--Network architect

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