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AT WORK

Laid off during the pandemic? Honing these skills can boost your job prospects

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KEY POINTS

There are now 36.5 million Americans who are unemployed and are reconsidering their next job move.

Career experts concur now is the time to hone your skills and look for part-time or gig work to ride out the recession.





Some online tools aim to help those looking to transition their careers.



A store stands closed near Wall Street as the coronavirus keeps financial markets and businesses mostly closed on May 08, 2020 in New York City





For the past three years, Josh Freeman, 26, has been a bus driver in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. But like many other school districts, his employer transitioned to virtual learning in March, and Freeman found himself out of a job.

“I went on spring break, and I’m still on spring break,” he says. “But I’m trying to make the most of it.”

After the first week without work, Freeman signed up for Merit America, a program aimed at helping adults without bachelor’s degrees transition into skilled careers. Freeman is about halfway through a training program to become a full-stack Java developer. In addition to skills development, Merit America is providing Freeman with career coaching and other support.

“I’m hoping to have a job before I finish the course [in July],” he says. “In this particular career field, you have a lot more options to work more remotely. With Covid, that’s definitely a benefit. Knowing that if things get locked down again, you still have a job and work you can do from home.”

Freeman is among millions who have found themselves abruptly out of work and reconsidering their next job move. The unemployment rate reached 14.7% in April, but in May the Labor Department revealed that rate is inching up, with 36.5 million Americans now [unemployed](#).

Even as some states such as Georgia and Texas start to lift shelter-in-place orders, the near-term prospects for workers in some industries -- such as hospitality or retail -- remains bleak as the demand for their services appears unlikely to return any time soon.

“The biggest challenge in this job market today is that no one has any idea what the state of the job market is right now,” says Greg Moran, CEO of Outmatch. “We don’t really know where the bottom is. We are at this point where we



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making their next career move than they have in the past.

Think skills, not job titles

“With hiring declines across industries, job seekers may feel uneasy about their prospects of finding a new job,” Glassdoor trends career expert Sarah Stoddard. “It’s key to remember that there are still open jobs around the country, so it’s worthwhile to stick to your search. Now, more than ever, is the time to consider how your unique skills and expertise could make you qualified for a wider range of roles you may not have considered before.”



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Even before the coronavirus crisis hit, employers were increasingly looking for workers who could bring the necessary skills to a specific job, even if that worker didn't have the exact work history in the field. As automation trends continue, soft skills, in particular, have become even more valuable.

[Mastercard](#), for example, has in recent years hired several employees from unexpected backgrounds, including a nursing student, an army diesel mechanic, and an English teacher into its cyber-security technology teams. The hires came through partnerships with programs such as LaunchCode, a non-profit that educates people to work in technology.

“You don't necessarily have to have a four-year degree,” says Mastercard Chief People Officer Michael Fraccaro. “There is a lot of accessible learning that's available online. We have knowledge requirements, but what really stands out for us is people who bring personal drive and deep curiosity.”

In addition, Mastercard looks for employees that demonstrate motivation and an attitude that fits with the company's mission, values, and culture, he adds.

“How you get things done is just as important as what you've done,” Fraccaro says.

The growing interest from employers in such soft skills is good news for job seekers today, since soft skills also tend to be more transferrable than some harder skills. A bartender that's sociable and has a strong service-oriented mindset might succeed in telemarketing or as a sales agent, according to an analysis by Outmatch. A first-line supervisor such as a shift lead or assistant manager might do well in a warehouse or production environment, the analysis found.



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Franklin, president of Manpower Group North America. “This is the time to reimagine what you want to do. Look at what you’ve done in the past and how it translates into the future.”

Take it for a test run

Short-term gigs not only keep a resume fresh during periods of unemployment, but they also give workers an opportunity to gain new skills or try out a new industry. Plus, companies may be willing to give a less experienced worker a try if they can do so without a long-term commitment.

“A short-term or part-time role may get you back to work a little bit faster,” says Brie Reynolds, a career development manager at FlexJobs. “Usually those roles tend to hire more quickly, because there’s a short-term need and they need someone right now. Even in the best economy, long-term jobs can take months to fill.” Another benefit of taking temporary work during this downturn is the pay. Four in 10 freelancers say that demand for their services has remained the same or gone up since the pandemic hit, [according to Payoneer](#).

You can find short-term roles by searching freelance-focused sites like FlexJobs or Upwork. Update your resume to make it clear that you’re open to freelance work, and to include any recent gigs once you have one.

“Once you establish some initial business, it’s important to perform well with your clients and network effectively to maximize referral opportunities,” says Jennifer Sethre, CEO of Intry.

Take advantage of the shift to remote work

In April, nearly a quarter of open jobs were roles that could be performed remotely, up from 8.6% a year ago, according to ManpowerGroup. As more jobs go virtual there’s less imperative to find a job within an easy commute of



...need to upgrade their digital literacy skills and master digital platforms.”

While those skills will likely vary by industry, workers across the board should be able to navigate a virtual world, communicating effectively with both colleagues and clients remotely.

Ryan Mohoric, 31, who lost his job as a marketing and CRM director for a global hospitality and nightlife company in Las Vegas, says he’s been applying to some jobs that don’t explicitly say that they’re a remote opportunity.

“I figure this is a good time to try it out,” he says. “Even if you get hired, no one is having you come into the office for a couple of months.”

Put technology to use

Mohoric is looking to transition his skills to a job in the tech sector, since that has more growth potential in the near term than hospitality. He’s regularly looking for jobs on a variety of job boards, including one called LayOffer.com, which aims to match displaced workers with recruiters.

There are more tech tools, such as EdApp, Udemy and SkillShare, than ever before available to workers who want to improve (both hard and soft) skills. There are free and paid online classes that learners can take to brush up on skills and even earn certifications that could help in the future.

Some online tools aim to help those looking to transition their careers. Career Test, for example, uses artificial intelligence to measure applicants’ personality traits, salary history, and experience, to match them with jobs where they can be most successful. Another good resource for those looking to switch careers is CareerOneStop.org, a



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While meeting mentors or former colleagues for drinks or coffee may not be feasible right now, it's still possible (and important) to connect with others who might be able to help you plan your next career step. Just checking in via phone or email can go a long way in these times to build relationships, and since more people are working from home they're open to a quick virtual catch up.

LinkedIn is a powerful way to connect with both your professional network and with your personal network on a professional level. It's a great resource for finding out whether you know someone at a company that has a job for which you're applying. More than 30% of workers say that they landed their most recent job through someone they knew, according to a [survey by CivicScience](#).

“What we are seeing right now is the best of humanity, where if you ask, people will help,” says Jennifer Sethre, CEO of Intry. “There are so many people and corporations who want to help people who are looking for a job. You just have to ask and start networking. You never know who knows someone who knows someone.”

There are also lots of opportunities now to connect via virtual events. Keep an eye out for virtual happy hours hosted by your college alumni network or industry associations, as well as for seminars or conferences that may have gone online this year.

Audrey Bareham, 30, an out-of-work [Lyft](#) driver in the San Francisco Bay Area says she's tapped into a local professional women's group for online meetings, and she's getting virtual career coaching, resume help, and mentorship through the organization Dress for Success.

Bareham is hoping to transition to administrative work that she can perform online.

“I'm still a little bit afraid to have a job out in the world,” she says. “I'm worried about getting sick and bringing it home



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Prep for a video interview

Many hiring managers now are conducting interviews via video conference, which requires a new set of skills for job candidates--one that's important to master in a new world of remote work.

Find out which platform you'll use ([Zoom](#), [Google Meet](#), etc.), and test it out before your interview.

“The best way to prepare for a virtual job interview is to practice,” says Mike Lang, director of employment services for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. “Find a friend or a family member who can give you honest feedback.”

Work on looking at the camera, rather than your screen, which gives the illusion of eye contact, and making sure that you have a professional-looking space with good lighting from which to log on. Do your research and learn as much as you can about the company and prepare some questions for the interviewer. Recruiter also recommend that you dress for the interview just as you would if it were occurring in person.

Consider each interview an opportunity to hone your virtual communication skills, and don't get discouraged if you don't land a job right away.

“If nothing else, stay in the practice of looking,” Moran says. “It may take longer than you'd like, but companies are going to start to hire again, and when they do it may be at an accelerated pace.”



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\$600 unemployment benefit will likely end July 31



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Barbara Booth

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