

WORKERS REINVENT THEMSELVES AFTER JOBS VANISH IN PANDEMIC

Flexibility and adaptability are the skills hiring managers seek; a former assistant ponders: "What can I bring to the table?"

By Kathryn Dill and Lauren Weber
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Some US workers, buffeted by a pandemic that has ravaged the labor market and reconfigured the workplace, are questioning whether to stick with their occupation or start an entirely new career.

Many are bolstering existing skills or resetting priorities such as which industry they work in, where they work or their job title. Others are taking classes to add new expertise and reinventing themselves in completely different fields. Experts advise individuals in both camps—whether staying put or starting over—that potential employers are likely to prize flexibility and adaptability when deciding on new hires.

Layoffs are driving some of these professional pivots; others have been inspired by a wish to stay in demand in a changing economy. The labor market has about 15 million fewer jobs than in February, the month before pandemic-related job losses in the US piled up. Firms that lay off workers during a crisis often don't hire them back when business improves, economists say, and many workers appear to understand this. Enrollments at community colleges typically increase during recessions, says Paul Osterman, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is studying how workers acquire skills. And workers now have access to an enormous array of online classes and credentials with costs ranging from free to thousands of dollars.

Paul Barnes had already been looking for a new post when he lost his job as a product developer at women's apparel brand Natori Co. in December. Once the coronavirus pandemic hit, he saw the leads he had cultivated disappear. "I realized, if I haven't found a job yet before Covid, then the likelihood of me finding a job now is lower than it was before, so I really need to figure something out," he says.

Despite having completed a degree at the Fashion Institute of Technology just a year earlier, he cast about for new skills to pick up and learned about the online coding school Springboard. Software engineering didn't appeal to Mr. Barnes, who is 33 years old, but he gravitated to a field known as UX Design, shorthand for user experience. UX Design's focus on coming up with a concept and going through trials to make it better reminded Mr. Barnes of his previous work.

He is on track to complete the six-month program early, at the end of August, and hopes to find a full-time UX Design job. "I feel pretty optimistic," he says. "Working remote, with the

potential to do freelance or contract work or to pivot into a field where I don't have to go into work every single day and get paid quite a bit more than what the fashion industry was offering—that sounds kind of appealing.”

With the economy in flux, trying to guess what skills will be most valuable is more difficult than ever, says Brad Hershbein, senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

“The best advice I can give is don't try to predict what skill is going to be most in demand, but have a mindset where you demonstrate that you can learn and adapt,” he says. “Businesses always want someone who can adapt to different circumstances. If you can demonstrate that in your work or education history, that's marketable and is probably the most resilient skill set you can have.”

Michael Green is a data-science and analytics consultant at Data Coach, part of analytics firm Tessellation. He helps people looking to launch careers in data science. Mr. Green made such a leap himself, after starting out in mechanical engineering in 2014 as a tire designer at Michelin. Over time, he became interested in how data science could improve his team's work, using free online classes to become an advanced Excel user and to learn R, a programming language for statistical computing. Using his knowledge of tire design and a statistical model, he came up with a way to predict when excess rubber stuck inside a mold would lead to a defective tire.

Even before the pandemic, he says, he was seeing an influx of clients who had impressive data-science knowledge but didn't know how to sell themselves to hiring managers. He advises clients to start conversations with people at the companies where they want to work and explain how their skills can be an asset. “Ultimately, you want to learn from them and convince them you can also help them solve those problems,” he says.

Individuals on the threshold of their careers are building flexibility into their job searches. Richard Ahn, who is job-hunting after graduating in May from the University of Texas at Austin, is focused more on the location than the company. Mr. Ahn, who is 21 and majored in supply-chain management, had been looking for work in Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco. When interviews for a position in Chicago with United Airlines stalled because of the pandemic, he decided to cast a wider net. He had been hoping to find work in procurement but broadened that to any job in supply-chain management.

He is now also applying for openings in Houston, San Diego, Austin and Seattle—a list he developed by researching growing industries and companies with headquarters in each city. “I'm more picky about the city than the company,” Mr. Ahn says, “but I do really want to work for an industry-leading company.”

For a year and a half, Maggie Blanchard worked as an assistant to a motivational speaker and author, traveling the country from her home in Nashville, Tenn., to conferences where her boss appeared. She was laid off when the live-events business cratered during the pandemic.

Ms. Blanchard, 26, began driving for Postmates, and, through a benefit the delivery company offers its independent contractors, began taking a philosophy class called "Justice" through the online education platform EdX. The class is honing skills such as analysis, critical thinking and resilience, which will benefit her career, she says.

"I held a position that no longer exists," Ms. Blanchard says. "No one is operating as an executive assistant in a live-events business in the capacity I was. So what is transferable? What can I bring to the table? The more I break it down, I think it boils down to: I'm the only thing that's transferable."