

Switching Careers Doesn't Have to Be Hard: Charting Jobs That Are Similar to Yours

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Ezekiel Moreno, a veteran who was stocking groceries for a living, got a job making aerospace parts at M&M Manufacturing in Tulsa, Okla., after enrolling in a retraining program. Credit Andrea Morales for The New York Times

Justin Cornett's story had been a 21st-century economic nightmare. He worked for 13 years on drilling rigs at a crude oil company near his home in Dorton, Ky. Then it halted production, and he was laid off. At 33, with two children and a mortgage, he couldn't find a stable new job of the kind he had trained for, because all the oil and coal mining companies in the area were shutting down.

Then things changed. He found a 16-week retraining program where he learned to program the computer numerical control, or CNC, machines used in advanced manufacturing. He got a job at a Lockheed Martin factory nearby, and it paid even more than his old one. "It was a little bit different, but it was easy for me," said Mr. Cornett, now 36. "I worked with my hands in the oil fields doing things of that nature, so it was pretty easy to catch on."

If his story's ending sounds like a fairy tale, that's because it is for many workers like Mr. Cornett — people without college degrees who work in occupations that are shrinking, with few other local options for the skills they have. "The U.S. faces a serious skills gap," R. Alexander Acosta, the secretary of labor, said last month when the Trump administration introduced steps to address the challenge.

But many of the skills needed to do fading jobs are applicable to growing jobs. A big part of the problem is the labor market does a poor job of matching employers with employees — in hiring, and in educating and retraining them to meet employers' needs.

"To solve this problem, people will need to have more skills, but the generation of skills is more an effect than a cause," said Byron Auguste, co-founder of Opportunity@Work, a nonprofit for job seekers with nontraditional backgrounds. "It works for half our work force but not for the other half."

A New Kind of Tech Job Emphasizes Skills, Not a College Degree A New York Times review of the activities and skills that jobs entail, based on the Labor Department's O*Net database, shows how much overlap there is between many seemingly dissimilar occupations. Service industry jobs, for example, require social skills and experience working with customers — which also apply to sales and office jobs.

A look at detailed skills data from the Labor Department shows how similar and dissimilar jobs are in the American labor market.

For some whose jobs have disappeared — particularly those without college degrees who worked in jobs requiring routine, physical labor — it can be nearly impossible to find a stable, well-paying new one. These jobs are more isolated, in terms of skills, from the rest of the labor market. Extensive research has shown that there are fewer middle-skill jobs, and that some displaced workers never recover, especially if they live in communities that no longer have jobs similar to their old ones or they don't have higher education.

"They have skills in what they do, but I'm not sure they have other skills that are transferable to

something else,” said Rome Aloise, an international vice president for the Teamsters, which represents various workers whose jobs could be automated, including truck drivers and cashiers. “I’m just not sure where all these people would go.”

Because people rarely spend their entire careers at one company anymore, employers have less incentive to invest in training workers in new skills, because they might quit and take those skills to a competitor, said David Deming, a professor of public policy, education and economics at Harvard. Workers also have little incentive to invest in training, because there’s no guarantee it will pay off with long-term employment. Others have trouble thinking of themselves as doing other kinds of jobs — which Lawrence Katz, a Harvard labor economist, says is an identity mismatch, not a skill mismatch.

Even if workers want to learn new skills and find new occupations, there is no streamlined way to do so. People procrastinate, inaccurately assess their own abilities and are unaware of what other jobs entail, according to behavioral economists. The United States spends a fraction of what other developed countries do on labor market adjustment programs like job counseling and retraining. Assistance is piecemeal, and many people who qualify don’t use it.

Meanwhile, employers hire based on credentials that job applicants can’t change — a college degree or previous job title — rather than assessing the skills an applicant has developed, said Mr. Auguste, who was an economic adviser in the Obama administration. He said the approach should instead be, “If you learned it at Harvard or Cal State Northridge or on the job as a secretary or in the Navy or as a volunteer, awesome.”

Laurel Yoder’s career is an example of how jobs can overlap in unexpected ways. She was a paralegal for six years, until she attended a friend’s childbirth and decided to become a doula, helping women in labor. She eventually went back to school to get degrees in nursing and midwifery, and is now a nurse-midwife in St. Joseph, Mich.

The two jobs have more skills in common than it might seem, she said, like “knowing how to be concise and thorough and document clearly so your colleague can follow your thought process.” Being a midwife is also future-proof in a way that being a paralegal isn’t. “This job will always be present because people will always be having babies,” said Ms. Yoder, 32.

Getting a new degree was unrealistic for Mr. Cornett: “I couldn’t drop everything and go back to school for two or three years. I’ve got a family, a house, a vehicle.”

He hadn’t considered advanced manufacturing until he heard about a local training program from a friend. It’s a natural jump for unemployed miners in Appalachia, said Kathy Walker, founder of the program, the eKentucky Advanced Manufacturing Institute. “It isn’t really a new skill set,” she said. “This is leveraging an existing skill set. They need a mechanical aptitude to mine coal, so the transition is very easy for them. We’re actually fitting a round peg into a round hole.”

Several new job boards, including Opportunity@Work and Skillful, use this approach to match workers with employers, job coaches and training programs based on skills instead of credentials.

Public policy has a role, too. The Trump administration’s expansion of the apprenticeship program — which enables people to learn on the job, while being paid — is a solution with bipartisan support. Employers like it, too, because they don’t have to depend on schools to teach what they want their workers to know.

Workers would have an easier time reapplying their skills if the government gave every displaced worker several types of assistance, said Mark Muro, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. These could include job counseling; cash grants for taking time off to take classes; wage insurance to make up

the difference for taking a lower-paying job; and relocation grants to move to areas of the country with more jobs.

These ideas could help left-behind workers, but they require money, effort and political will. For younger people just starting out, or employed in fields that might shrink, the answer is simpler, said Mr. Aloise of the Teamsters: “My advice is to go back to school and figure out some other type of profession.”

*O*Net scores hundreds of jobs on dozens of characteristics. Using a technique known as principal components analysis, we distilled those characteristics into four general categories: physical work; communication and critical thinking; operating machines and processes; and clerical and service work.*

To find the skill overlaps for an occupation:

Cut and paste the following link into your browser. In the middle of the text of the article is a heading “**Which jobs have the most (and least) overlap in skills with . . .**” Followed by a box into which you can enter a job or occupation (e. g. lawyer, marketing manager, accountant . . .) The jobs with the most and least skill overlap and extent to which they are automatable will appear in the table below the box.

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