



How to Use the Bureau of Labor Statistics Before Choosing Your Next Job

Before sending applications or investing in training, it helps to understand the work you are pursuing. What does the occupation involve? What preparation does it typically require? What do workers earn, and what opportunities might exist where you live?

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, part of the Department of Labor, provides free information that can help you answer those questions. Its resources are useful for students, unemployed workers, and experienced people considering a change.

BLS provides research about occupations and labor markets. You will still need current job listings to identify employers hiring now.

Start With the Occupational Outlook Handbook

The [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) is a practical starting point. Search for an occupation you are considering or browse occupational groups to discover possibilities.

Each profile brings together information about duties, working conditions, typical preparation, pay, and employment outlook. Read beyond the summary figures. The description of daily work may tell you more about whether an occupation suits you than its salary ranking does.

Consider the environment as well as the tasks. Would you enjoy working directly with customers? Can you accommodate irregular hours? Does the work involve physical demands, travel, or substantial time at a computer?

Search by the Work, Not Just the Job Title

Employers sometimes use different titles for similar duties. If your preferred title does not produce a clear match, search for related activities or a broader occupational group.

Read the duties to confirm that you have found the right category. A job called “coordinator,” for example, could involve administration, logistics, events, or another specialty.

Use the handbook’s similar-occupations information to identify alternatives. You may discover work that draws on your existing skills but requires a different preparation path.

Check What It Takes to Enter the Field

Study the profile’s explanation of how to enter the occupation. Look for typical education, related experience, on-the-job training, and any discussion of licensing or certification.

“Typical” does not mean every employer requires exactly the same background. Compare the overview with actual advertisements before deciding that you qualify—or that you do not.

If additional training appears necessary, investigate its cost, duration, and connection to employer requirements. Confirm licensing details with the relevant licensing authority before enrolling.

The handbook’s [Occupation Finder](#) can also help narrow your search using factors such as education, training, pay, and projected growth.

Understand What the Pay Figures Mean

Pay information is useful only when you understand the measure being shown.

A **median wage** is the midpoint: half of workers earn less and half earn more. It is not a promised starting salary. A **mean wage** is an average and can differ from the median.

Wages also vary by location, industry, experience, and employer. Lower wage percentiles do not automatically represent beginners, just as higher percentiles do not automatically represent a particular number of years of experience.

Check whether a figure is hourly or annual and note the data year. Treat it as a research reference to compare with current advertised ranges and the full compensation package.

Distinguish Growth From Job Openings

A fast growth rate can attract attention, but it does not tell the whole story.

Percentage growth describes the projected change in employment. A small occupation can grow quickly while adding relatively few jobs. A larger occupation with slower growth may offer more openings.

Projected openings also include opportunities arising when people leave an occupation, not just newly created positions. Consequently, an occupation with little growth—or even declining employment—can still have openings.

Read the explanation behind the projection. These are estimates of future patterns, not a count of vacancies available today or a guarantee that a particular applicant will find work.

Look at Your State or Metropolitan Area

National information provides context, but your local labor market may be different.

Use the [Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics program](#), often abbreviated OEWS, to explore employment and wage estimates by occupation and location. Its tables can help you compare an occupation across states or metropolitan areas.

Remember that an employment estimate describes people employed in an occupation; it does not count unfilled positions. A higher wage elsewhere also needs to be weighed against housing, transportation, and other living costs.

When comparing figures, use the same occupation, wage measure, and data period wherever possible.

Try a Simple Career Comparison

Suppose you have administrative experience and are considering two directions. Here is a manageable research exercise:

- 1 **Find two relevant occupational profiles.** Match their duties to the work you are actually considering.
- 2 **Record the preparation required.** Note education, training, experience, and credentials.
- 3 **Compare working conditions.** Consider schedules, responsibilities, and demands.
- 4 **Record pay and outlook information.** Label the wage year and projection period.
- 5 **Check local employment and wages.** Use the same geographic area for both occupations.
- 6 **Compare current advertisements.** See whether local employers' requirements and salary ranges support your initial impression.

Keep your findings on one page. Add a final column for unanswered questions, such as whether a certificate is necessary or whether employers accept related experience.

This exercise gives you a shortlist to investigate further before committing money or months to a new direction.

Turn Research Into a Job-Search Plan

Once you identify a promising occupation, look for current openings, speak with people doing the work, and investigate any preparation you need.

Use the research to choose better search terms, identify transferable skills, and prepare questions for employers or training providers. Revisit the figures periodically, checking their dates rather than assuming every page describes today's conditions.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics cannot choose your career for you. It can help you ask better questions and make a more informed decision about where to direct your job search.