

# Filling the Lifeboats

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Getting Americans Back to Work  
in the Pandemic



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The coronavirus pandemic has done something no foreign power, economic recession, or natural disaster could ever do: it has brought the American job market as close as it has ever come to a sudden, shuddering halt. And simply lifting social distancing restrictions isn't going to be enough to restart it again.

A mere two months ago, amidst a booming job market, there were only 216,000 new claims for unemployment insurance filed.<sup>1</sup> By April 30, there were 3.9 million new claims filed on top of 26 million already in the system – so many that the unemployment insurance agencies can't keep up.<sup>2</sup> New U.S. job postings fell 43% in five weeks.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, Burning Glass offers a starting point for the massive and urgent short-term re-employment challenge before us: identifying the work that is available and suggesting how to get workers into those jobs. Our approach is based

on an understanding of how different occupations overlap in terms of knowledge, education, experience, and most of all, the skills required. By building pathways between occupations, by understanding exactly which skills distinguish one job from the next, we can move workers into the jobs that exist with the most efficient use of time and resources.

Based on our database of more than a billion job postings and resumes worldwide, there are two key points that can guide the response:

- Even in the depths of the pandemic's economic shock, there are jobs that can serve as "lifeboats" for at least some of those who have lost work and that require little or no retraining; and
- There are pathways from these lifeboat jobs and from jobs lost in the pandemic into roles with decent pay and a solid future.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, "Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims," March 5, 2020 <https://oui.doleta.gov/press/2020/030520.pdf>  
<sup>2, 3</sup> <https://www.burning-glass.com/blog/covid-19-us-job-postings-impact/>

## Contact Tracing: The Rising Role of the Pandemic?

Pandemics not only destroy jobs but they also create them, and perhaps no job demonstrates that for the coronavirus crisis as much as the sudden surge of interest in “contact tracers.”

Contact tracing is the public health technique of identifying and contacting the people who may have been near to an infected person so that they, too, can be tested and treated if necessary. This isn't a new technique and is used every day by public health departments dealing with diseases like tuberculosis, measles, sexually transmitted diseases, and others.

States have said they want to ramp up contact tracing, with New York State alone reportedly set to hire thousands of contact tracers.<sup>1</sup> No one expects these to be long-term jobs, but can they be lifeboat jobs, giving laid-off workers a way to stay afloat in the short term?

Early job postings examined by Burning Glass Technologies show these jobs paying between \$17 and \$22 per hour, which is above the generally accepted “living wage” of \$15 per hour. Most of these postings seem to be work-from-home jobs that require workers to have their own phone and Internet connections to reach out to possible contacts. In these cases, workers will be provided with a script of interview questions and quarantine requirements and won't be allowed to deviate from it.

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<sup>1</sup> The Associated Press, “Unprecedented: Seeking an Army to Trace Virus in New York,” April 24, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/04/24/us/ap-us-virus-outbreak-tracing.html](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/04/24/us/ap-us-virus-outbreak-tracing.html)

Many of the skills in these early postings are not unlike those asked of Customer Service Representatives: interpersonal skills, organizational skills, computer literacy, CRM skills, and the ability to show empathy to distressed individuals. At least some of these postings only ask for a high school diploma and do not ask for specialized health knowledge.

That gives these roles a different profile from Community Health Workers, the role that handles contact tracing in more normal times. Those roles usually require a bachelor's degree along with knowledge of mental health and crisis counseling.

Will contact tracing jobs give people skills and training to position them for health care roles? Based on the limited information available, the case management and communication skills involved could overlap with roles like Social and Human Service Assistants, although the tracers will probably not get in-depth health training. But they do provide a strong basis either to be a lifeboat for displaced Customer Service Representatives, or to allow people without customer service experience to move into that field after the pandemic.



To identify “lifeboat jobs,” we looked at jobs that didn’t require advanced training, education, or a license. In addition, we selected jobs that were growing, or at least declining at lower rates than the market overall. To qualify, growth was in multiple states and the growth in these states was substantial. We also want to emphasize that these lifeboat jobs are not dead-end occupations. Each has pathways to reach longer-term opportunities with salary increases for these workers.

There is a greater challenge beyond the immediate crisis: rebuilding an economy where businesses will reopen in a patchwork process

driven by public health rather than economics, where supply chains are strained to the limit, and where jobs will not just reappear as they had existed before. The jobs that will characterize that recovery is a matter for a future report.

The analysis below is based on Burning Glass Technologies job postings data, collected from 40,000 online sources daily. The methodology was devised for a series of reports Burning Glass developed with the World Economic Forum and BCG to identify which jobs workers displaced by technology can transition to in the real world.<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum, “Towards a Reskilling Revolution: A Future of Jobs for All,” January 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/towards-a-reskilling-revolution>

## How We Can Get More Workers Employed Now

Even in the depths of a recession, even as lockdowns keep people at home, the job market does not stop completely. Someone is always hiring. Companies like Amazon, Dollar General,

and CVS have all been hiring thousands of workers to meet the sudden demand for shipping, delivery, and both prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Even a pandemic creates some jobs.

### Least impacted occupations

Rank	Occupation	Job Postings from week of 3/2 to week of 4/20	Growth from week of 3/2 to week of 4/20
1	Shipping, Receiving, and Traffic Clerks	10,175	59%
2	Driver/Sales Workers	28,739	28%
3	Personal Care Aides	28,888	4%
4	Mental Health Counselors	9,312	4%
5	Computer and Information Research Scientists	6,637	-6%
6	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	37,246	-7%
7	Cashiers	31,459	-12%
8	Respiratory Therapists	8,987	-19%
9	Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	51,948	-19%
10	Home Health Aides	17,305	-20%

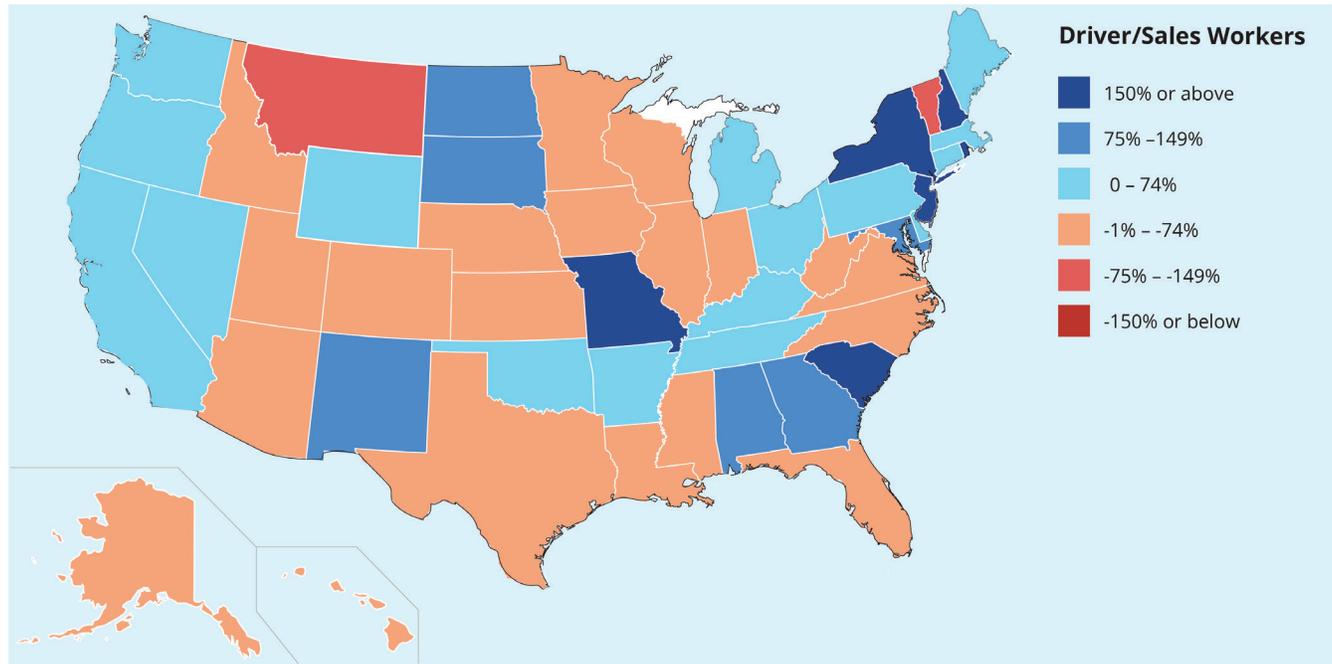
## Most impacted occupations

Rank	Occupation	Job Postings from week of 3/2 to week of 4/20	Decline from week of 3/2 to week of 4/20
1	Dining Room and Cafeteria Attendants and Bartender Helpers	6,707	-81%
2	Bartenders	8,367	-78%
3	Tellers	8,183	-76%
4	Phlebotomists	5,211	-75%
5	Counter and Rental Clerks	5,377	-75%
6	Hosts and Hostesses, Restaurant, Lounge, and Coffee Shop	9,587	-74%
7	Hotel, Motel, and Resort Desk Clerks	13,360	-74%
8	Waiters and Waitresses	23,248	-73%
9	Demonstrators and Product Promoters	5,660	-72%
10	Preschool Teachers, Except Special Education	13,156	-72%

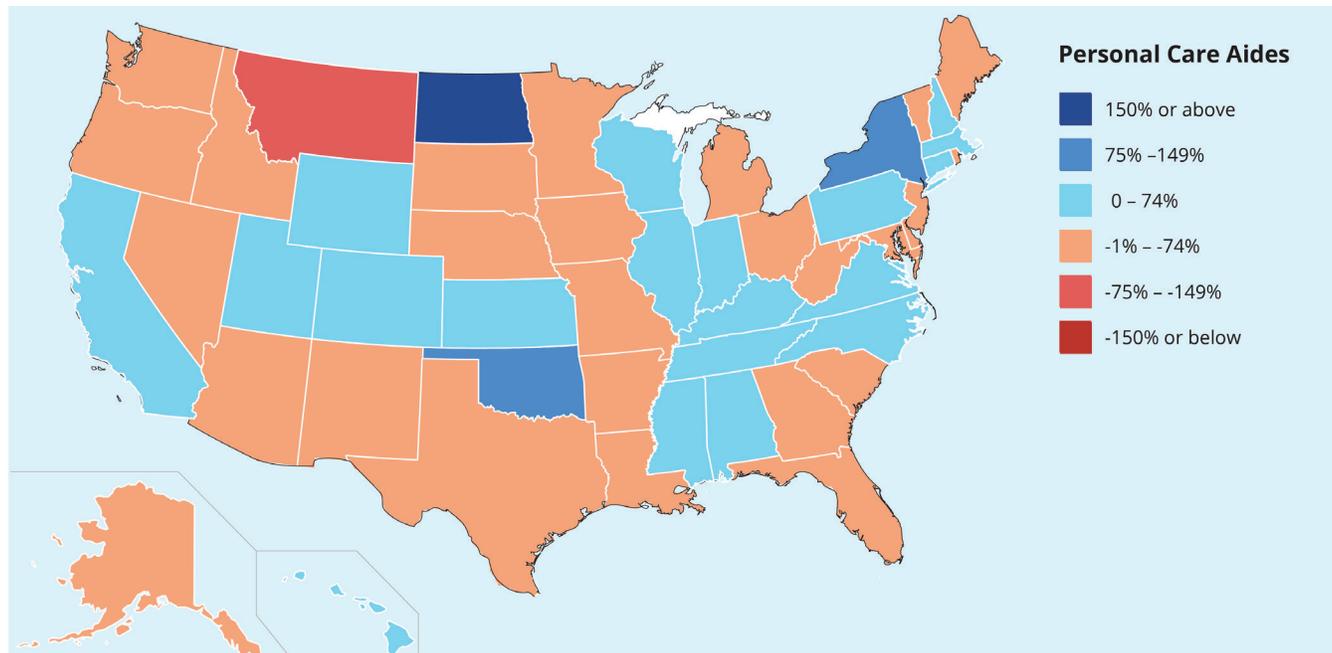
In addition, the job market is regional. Openings in an occupation may be down nationally, but that doesn't mean they are declining everywhere at

the same time. Pockets of opportunity may exist. Postings for Web Developers, for example, are down -25% nationally, but have actually increased in 10 states, including Virginia and Washington state.

### Change in demand for Driver Sales workers by state



### Change in demand for Personal Care Aides by state



Some states have small total posting counts which may result in high percentage changes.

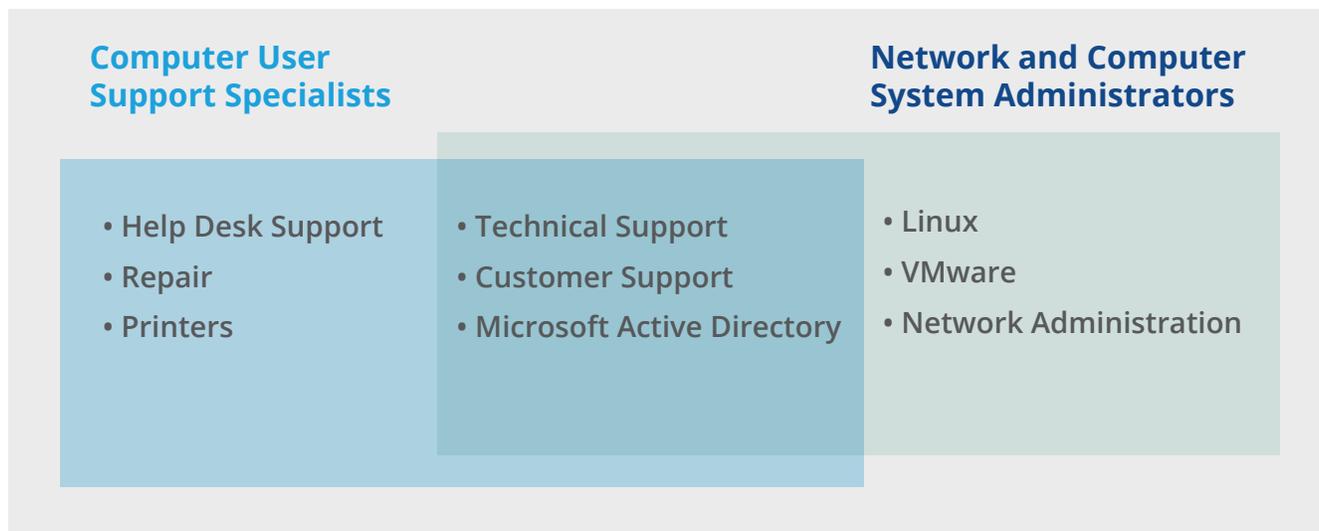
For those out of work, grabbing onto a lifeboat job is crucial. A lifeboat job is one that is available, unlikely to go away, and pays enough to provide some shelter until the crisis is past. But, to be a realistic lifeboat, a job also needs to have other qualities.

In the first place, the job can't require lengthy reskilling. For those in need of immediate reemployment, there isn't time to get a degree or go through a licensing process.

Second, the job should ideally provide an option to advance. The goal of a lifeboat is to give those within it a chance of rescue. You may be grateful for your survival, but eventually you want to reach dry land. A dead-end job is like drifting in the lifeboat forever: survivable in the short term, but much worse than the job you had to leave. Yet multiple studies have shown this is exactly

what happens: laid-off workers may never regain the pay levels they had enjoyed before losing their job. And technological change and upskilling are major reasons why these workers are left behind.<sup>5</sup>

The secret is in finding "skills adjacencies": jobs that demand a skillset that overlaps as much as possible with the skills in a worker's old job. The more the two skillsets overlap, the closer the hiring fit and the easier the move for both worker and employer. Often these adjacencies are non-obvious, representing options that are far afield from the occupation in which the worker was previously engaged. The challenge is that neither the worker nor the employer may realize that the opportunity exists; neither may be looking outside their own field.



<sup>5</sup> Carter, J. Braxton and Bledi Taska "Technology Adoption and the Consequences of Job Loss," (2020), Working Paper, Minnesota University

How does this work in practice? The chart below shows how the skills of workers in declining “feeder” occupations sometimes overlap with occupations that are staying relatively stable or even growing during the pandemic. In addition, it lays out next-step careers built on the skills workers have plus the skills they acquire by working in their lifeboat jobs.

For example, both Hotel, Motel, and Resort Desk Clerks and Waiters and Waitresses are occupations hard-hit by the pandemic lockdowns. Both, however, also have significant skillsets in common with the growing occupation of Stock Clerks and Order Fillers. These displaced workers could move

into those roles relatively easily, and that’s not hard to see.

But even low-paid hospitality workers are unlikely to see stocking the shelves in the warehouse of an online retailer to be a desirable move. The real question is how do you move onward beyond the temporary relief of a lifeboat job? Here too, the idea of skill adjacency modeling proves powerful. In this case, after the pandemic passes these workers would be well-placed to move into roles as Ticket Agents or as Freight Handlers at higher salaries than they were making previously.



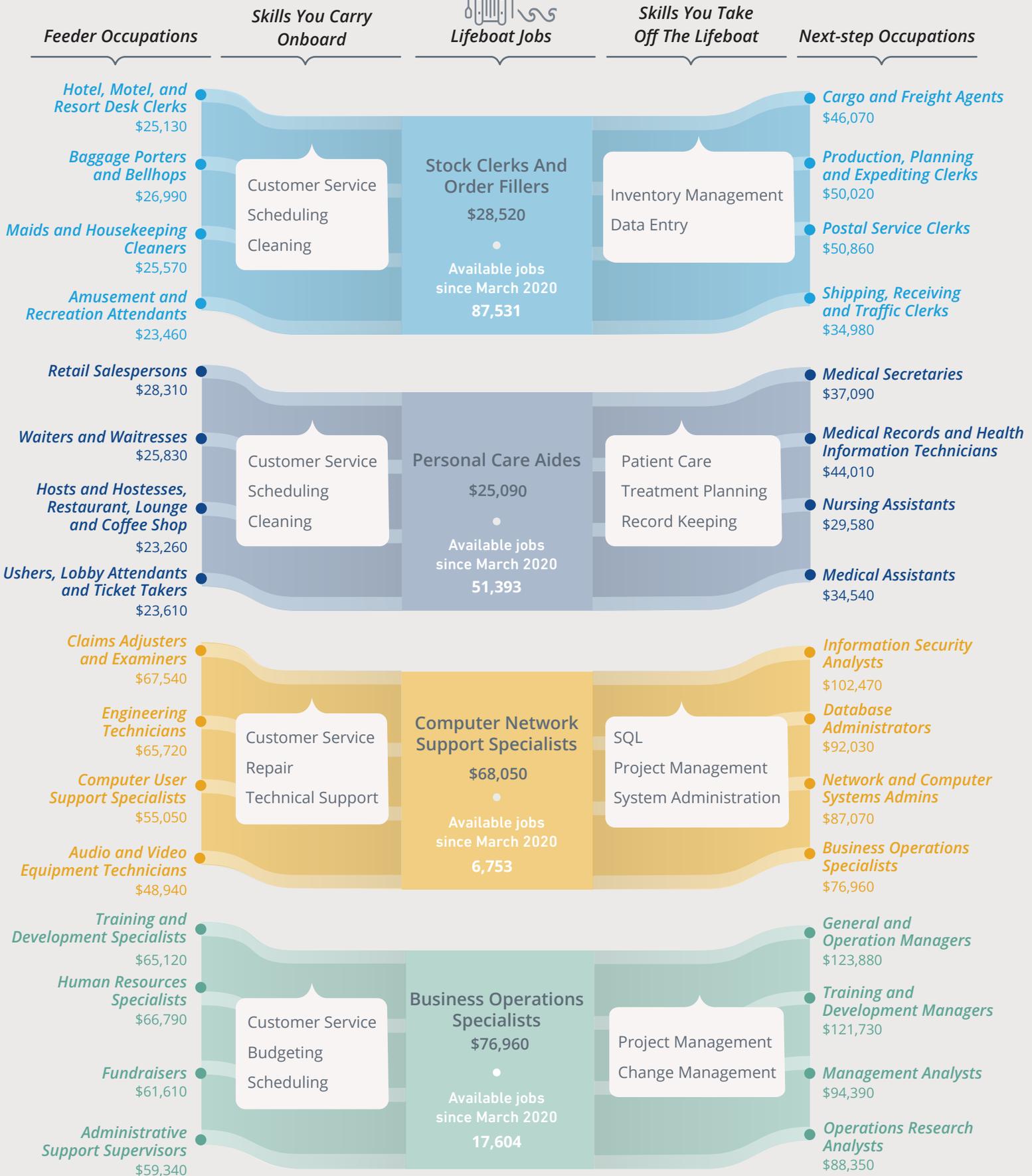
## Lifeboats in turbulent waters

Occupation Title	Available Jobs since March	Average Annual Salary (2019)	Change in Online Job Postings (Between weeks of 3/2 and 4/20)	States with Posting Increase	Average Unweighted Growth Across States With Posting Increase
Shipping, Receiving, and Traffic Clerks	17,938	\$34,980	59%	37	287%
Driver/Sales Workers	52,615	\$29,610	28%	29	84%
Personal Care Aides	51,393	\$25,090	4%	22	49%
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	68,608	\$28,950	-7%	24	68%
Cashiers	57,321	\$23,240	-12%	25	64%
Computer Network Support Specialists	6,753	\$68,050	-19%	13	95%
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	87,531	\$28,520	-19%	14	81%
Home Health Aides	31,345	\$25,330	-20%	12	50%
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	203,857	\$45,570	-21%	20	93%
First-Line Supervisors of Construction Trades and Extraction Workers	9,388	\$70,540	-23%	8	103%
Real Estate Sales Agents	31,106	\$61,720	-24%	12	83%
Information Security Analysts	42,116	\$102,470	-25%	11	56%
Insurance Sales Agents	53,321	\$67,890	-28%	12	57%
Business Operations Specialists, All Other	17,604	\$76,960	-30%	8	71%

## Lifeboats in turbulent waters

Occupation Title	Defining Skill 1	Defining Skill 2	Defining Skill 3
Shipping, Receiving, and Traffic Clerks	Forklift Operation	Lifting Ability	Sorting
Driver/Sales Workers	Customer Service	Product Sales	Lifting Ability
Personal Care Aides	Caregiving	Meal Preparation	Bathing
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	Cleaning	Repair	Customer Service
Cashiers	Customer Service	Customer Checkout	Sales
Computer Network Support Specialists	Technical Support	Customer Service	Network Administration
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	Customer Service	Merchandising	Forklift Operation
Home Health Aides	Home Health	Bathing	Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR)
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	Commercial Driving	Handling of Hazardous Materials	Customer Service
First-Line Supervisors of Construction Trades and Extraction Workers	Scheduling	Construction Management	Budgeting
Real Estate Sales Agents	Sales	Leasing	Customer Service
Information Security Analysts	Information Security	Information Systems	Linux
Insurance Sales Agents	Sales	Insurance Underwriting	Purchasing
Business Operations Specialists, All Other	E-Commerce	Product Management	Customer Service

# How to board the lifeboats and where they may take you



Cumulatively there have been roughly 8 million job postings in March and April. We don't pretend that lifeboat jobs are available for all the 26 million people left unemployed by the current crisis. The dimensions of the disaster are too great for that.

But we do believe that every job filled increases productivity, relieves the pressure on an overburdened unemployment insurance system, reassures families worried about their next paycheck, and gets more money flowing through the economy which in turn creates more jobs. Job boards and state labor agencies striving to place dislocated workers can use skill adjacencies to increase the options available to their clients.

Some would argue that no strategy is required to lead people to these lifeboat jobs. As a matter of economics, with so many unemployed chasing relatively few jobs, these roles will fill themselves quickly enough. But the job market is not as efficient as it should be. Workers and employers rarely have perfect information about what opportunities are available. And so opportunities are missed, or at least filled much later than they could have been and at lower levels of success and efficiency.

Inefficiency in a crisis carries a toll. After all, as a matter of economics, the Titanic's lifeboats should have been filled with every possible passenger, instead of only about half of what they could carry. "If they are sending the boats away, they might as well put some people in them," one crewman is said to have said sardonically as the lifeboats pulled away.<sup>6</sup> We would argue his philosophy should guide us in this crisis.

There are additional steps leaders and communities can take to address immediate needs while positioning for longer-term success:

- **Providing the newly unemployed with a Waze app for their careers.** Some skills overlaps are obvious, while others may not occur to most job seekers and workforce development practitioners. Providing job seekers with skills-level data that highlights adjacencies to available jobs allows unemployed workers to seize opportunities they might otherwise have missed, and enables employers to connect more efficiently with the talent they need.

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<sup>6</sup> Lord, Walter, "A Night to Remember: The Classic Account of the Final Hours of the Titanic," 2004

- **Streamlining requirements.** Critical occupations with licensing requirements such as healthcare occupations confront the dual challenges of low supply of workers and longer processes for becoming eligible. Many states have adjusted licensing requirements to enable more individuals to assume these critical roles more rapidly.
- **Flattening the curve of workforce development needs.** Just as we fear overwhelming health care systems with COVID-19 cases and just as our unemployment systems struggles with large numbers of newly unemployed, our workforce development systems are at risk of being overwhelmed as well. The enhanced unemployment benefits added to meet the crisis are set to expire later this summer, even as workforce practitioners

adjust to providing placement and training remotely. Placing workers in jobs before their benefits expire can get dislocated workers onto new trajectories sooner, and flatten the curve of a summertime spike in demand for already-challenged workforce development systems.

- **Health as a key component of workforce development programming.** COVID-19 may be a threat for some time and, with luck, many people can be re-employed before the pandemic is over. In addition to basic “job readiness” skills such as professional behavior and resume writing, workers will need to understand how to keep themselves, their customers, and their co-workers safe as restrictions are lifted. We’ve focused on transitions that require little or no job training, but this health knowledge may need to be addressed, even in the short term.



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## Burning Glass Technologies

One Lewis Wharf

Boston, MA 02110

+1 (617) 227-4800

[www.burning-glass.com](http://www.burning-glass.com)

Burning Glass Technologies delivers job market analytics that empower employers, workers, and educators to make data-driven decisions.

The company's artificial intelligence technology analyzes hundreds of millions of job postings and real-life career transitions to provide insight into labor market patterns. This real-time strategic intelligence offers crucial insights, such as which jobs are most in demand, the specific skills employers need, and the career directions that offer the highest potential for workers. **Find out more at [burning-glass.com](http://burning-glass.com).**