

7 Reasons to Ignore ‘Best Jobs’ Lists

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As the job market finally starts to show **signs of improvement**, it might seem natural to want to take a closer look at the “**Best Jobs**” and “**Hot Careers**” lists that media outlets of all stripes produce like clockwork every year. After all, who wants to stay stuck in a **dying industry**?

But here’s the problem: For the vast majority of readers, these lists are utterly worthless, highlighting jobs that you can’t get or, in some cases, wouldn’t really want if you knew the truth about them. As a result, using these lists as a guide to a job search risks squandering valuable time and resources that could be devoted to pursuing more realistic job opportunities. (Naturally, we think our own **list of six-figure dream jobs** is a better guide to these types of careers because we screened for broad-based, high-paying positions that didn’t require tons of additional training).

Here are seven reasons why most “Hot Jobs” lists should be regarded with the same skepticism as a **candy** or **cookie diet**.

1. You’re not qualified, and it would take too long to get qualified.

Most top jobs lists emphasize positions that pay a lot of money, are deeply satisfying, and sometimes both — a surgeon saving lives, for example, or a college professor cultivating young minds. But if you’re like the typical job hunter most interested in these lists, you’re probably either a mid-career professional who’s been laid off, or a recent college graduate. And as Christine Bolzan, a Massachusetts-based career coach who works with MIT’s Sloan School of Business and Wesleyan University, points out, “What good does it do a 40-year-old mid-career job seeker to see that the highest average salary this year went to aeronautical engineers [when] there’s nothing they can do at this point in their career to enter that field?”

Bolzan concedes, though, that the typical Best Jobs list could be helpful to one specific group of people: junior high school students. At that age, she says, they can still choose the right curriculum

to get into the right college, and eventually the right post-graduate program to become, say, an engineer or surgeon or professor. Assuming, of course, that those jobs are still hot in 2022.

2. You'll need to move.

Throughout even the depths of the recession and continuing today, a few companies have gone on hiring sprees. Facebook, for instance, recently announced a \$1.5 billion investment via Goldman Sachs that will help it add to its hordes of software developers and IT professionals. Good news for qualified job seekers, right? Well, not unless you live in the San Francisco Bay Area, which is where the bulk of those Facebook jobs are located — along with those for other tech giants adding jobs, such as Google.

And even if you are qualified enough and receive a job offer from Mark Zuckerberg himself, moving from somewhere like Gainesville, Florida or Peoria, Illinois to Palo Alto presents many big challenges, not the least of which is trying to sell your home without taking a financial bath. And geographic constraints exist for several other popular careers that appear on Best Jobs lists, such as positions in the gaming industry, which are largely centered in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Foxwoods in Connecticut. Other popular career list entries, such as [meeting planner](#) or [actuary](#), also tend to be clustered in urban areas like New York City, says Roy Cohen, a career counselor in New York.

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3. Growth can be deceiving.

Most best career lists rely on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to identify the fastest-growing sectors and positions. But while BLS job growth numbers represent the best and most accurate information available, they can be of limited use. For example, [meteorologist](#) and [museum curator](#) often show up as promising careers because of their growth projections; the BLS predicts that the number of meteorologist jobs will increase by 15 percent between 2008 and 2018 and the number of curator jobs will increase by about 23 percent. But what does that growth mean in terms of hard numbers? Not much — by 2018, there will only be about 1,400 additional meteorology jobs and 2,700 more curator jobs. “Sometimes the fastest growing industries are not the largest industries,” says Nicole Smith, an economist at the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

Compare that with, say, manufacturing —usually regarded as a dead end because of outsourcing, but nevertheless expected to see many new positions open up as baby boomers retire. By some estimates, [as many as 100,000 jobs in manufacturing](#) could be available by 2020. “While no new jobs are being created in manufacturing, there are opportunities created through replacement jobs,” Smith says.

4. It's a dead end.

For the past few years, just about every prediction around where rapid job growth would take place in the future has included health care, and 2011 is no different. But health care is a very general term, and apart from doctors and nurses, some of the promising careers highlighted on a number of lists this year include jobs such as **dental hygienist** and **massage therapist**. Justin Schakelman, vice president and partner at the outplacement firm CareerMinds, says that while there *will* be a lot more dental hygienist positions — 237,000 more by 2018, according to BLS statistics — burnout and health problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome are common. Furthermore, as Schakelman sees it, those who spend the time and money to earn the necessary and very specialized certificate to become a dental hygienist will have few options if they decide that being on their feet all day sticking their hands in mouths is not for them. “It’s expected that a person in Gen Y or Gen X will change careers seven times,” he points out. “That rate requires an individual to have a well-rounded educational background in order to adjust and adapt. Folks who are highly specialized are paralyzed.”

5. Average salaries mean nothing.

While the health care sector is undoubtedly producing jobs, it’s wise to be very wary of any list that promotes the average salary for jobs in a given industry. Georgetown’s Smith breaks health care jobs into two groups, professional and support, with the former being highly-trained doctors and nurses, and the latter representing positions requiring much less education and training — and are much less well-compensated — like home health aide. So taking the average salary of a large group that includes surgeons making \$300,000 a year and home health aides earning minimum wage can give a false impression of what you can expect. “If you are in the support occupations, which are growing very fast, their wage structure is difficult,” says Smith. “Lots of them don’t pay a living wage.”

6. The projections represent more hype than reality.

For national security and environmental reasons, it’s probably true that the United States will eventually make a transition to renewable energy and, in the process, create millions of so-called green jobs. But that’s the future. For job seekers today, the existing positions are elusive and clustered in distinct geographic areas; solar jobs, for instance, can mostly be found in sunny California, where the state government has actively supported the industry with incentives. “Most every [green job] I’ve seen is pretty early stage, and they’re not looking for the skill sets [our students] have to offer,” says Lynne Sarikas, director of the MBA Career Center at Northeastern University in Boston. “These companies seem to be in start-up or exploratory mode, sort of where biotech was 10 or 15 years ago.” In fact, *Photon Magazine*, a publication that covers the solar industry, estimates that there were only 15,620 jobs harnessing the sun to produce power in all

of the United States in 2009. Compared to the latest BLS data showing that there are [13.9 million unemployed Americans](#), and 15,000 jobs doesn't really look so great.

7. Budget crises could upend many of these predictions.

Across the country, state and local governments face apocalyptic budget shortfalls, leading to tax increases and drastic cuts to schools and other programs. Which makes it a little strange that public sector jobs, like teachers, firefighters, and positions in government agencies, would be [deemed promising](#) at all. "We think a lot of forecasts around public sector growth are problematic," says Scott Albro, founder and CEO of Focus.com, a web site that provides guidance to businesses on a wide variety of topics, including human resources and hiring. Albro's skepticism about the public sector extends to the federal government, where President Obama enacted a two-year pay freeze for employees and proposed a five-year freeze on domestic spending in his [State of the Union address](#). "A pay freeze is a leading indicator of [the lack of] hiring on the federal side," says Albro.

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