

A Job Seeker's Guide to the Stimulus Package

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The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act presents a dilemma to many job seekers. Sure, it's projected to save or create 3.5 million jobs. But since its goal is to stimulate the economy quickly, most of those positions will be filled in the next year or two. That's great for experienced candidates who can start working immediately. But if you're still in school or are contemplating a career change, the hiring might be over by the time you enter the job market.

Should you take a short-term stimulus into account when planning your long-term career? This overview explores four major elements of the Recovery Act, the jobs they're creating now – and whether these jobs will still be around after the spending ends.

Infrastructure/Transportation

Funding Highlights: \$27.5 billion to repair or construct highways and bridges, \$17.7 billion for passenger rail and other public transit

Short-term Outlook: The government estimates that infrastructure and transportation projects in the stimulus will create or save 1.8 million jobs, in everything from civil engineering and cost estimating to construction labor. But though short-term job opportunities will be plentiful, Joel Elvery, labor economics professor at Cleveland State University, cautions that the construction industry's struggles will make competition tight. "There were 1.8 million unemployed construction workers in April 2009," he says. "So it will mostly help put people who are currently out of work back to work, not create new opportunities for entry-level workers"

Long-term Prognosis: If the economy hasn't recovered when government spending ends, demand for construction projects could dry up. So it would be risky to enter the field based solely on the stimulus. If construction work interests you, do some research to determine how strong the job market is in your area. As Elvery puts it, "Students should be focused on finding a career, not a job. Choose a career that matches your interests and has had steady growth in your region before the recession." Degree programs like construction science or construction management will prepare you to take advantage of whatever opportunities are available.

Healthcare

Funding Highlights: \$87 billion in assistance to Medicaid, \$19 billion to accelerate adoption of health information technology, \$10 billion for medical research and facilities upgrades

Short-term Outlook: The government estimates that healthcare stimulus projects will create hundreds of thousands of jobs – and not just for highly trained medical providers. According to Laurence Shatkin, career expert and author of "Great Jobs in the President's Stimulus Plan,"

“Stimulus funding for extended COBRA insurance and Medicaid will create many associate-level jobs, including licensed practical nurses, medical assistants, and radiologic technologists. Medical records technicians, systems analysts, database managers and data entry workers will also see job openings from the funding for digitizing health records. And as a relatively new career, health information technology will experience less competition from experienced workers.”

Long-term Prognosis: Healthcare was a great career choice before the stimulus, and it’s even better now. Patient care jobs will show continued strong growth, as the baby boomer generation ages. And the national transition to electronic medical records could make health information technology a hot career for years to come. Some colleges are already responding to the anticipated demand, offering degrees in health information technology and health information management.

Energy/Environment

Funding Highlights: \$34 billion for smart grid, renewable energy and efficiency projects, \$10 billion to lower energy use in federal facilities and public buildings, \$5 billion for home weatherization

Short-term Outlook: With over 500,000 new jobs projected in renewable energy development and energy efficiency initiatives, the stimulus will spark a major expansion of the green economy. Job opportunities will range from manual “green collar” work like insulation and solar panel installation, to higher level positions in environmental engineering, sustainability consulting, architecture and urban planning.

Long-term Prognosis: Oil reserves are dwindling, global warming is increasing, and the president hopes to invest \$150 billion in clean energy over the next ten years. So green jobs should be plentiful long after the stimulus is over. According to Stacy Ho, a policy associate at Green For All, “The Recovery Act is designed to set the foundation for projects that are financially self-sustaining in the long run. For example, if we install solar panels in homes, those panels will have to be maintained and repaired. There’s continual work that needs to be done. So we’re looking at an economic and environmental transformation of our economy – it’s not a short-term thing.” If that proves true, degrees in fields like renewable energy technology or environmental management could provide a lifetime of employment.

Education

Funding Highlights: \$39.5 billion to help states avoid teacher layoffs and other education cuts, \$13 billion for schools serving disadvantaged children, \$12.2 billion for special education

Short-term Outlook: A recent study at the University of Washington estimated that state budget cuts could claim almost 600,000 education jobs over the next three years. That means much of

the stimulus money for education will be spent on preserving existing jobs rather than creating new ones. While that's good news if you're already teaching, it means prospective teachers shouldn't expect a sudden hiring boom. The best way to find a stimulus job in education is to follow the money. Targeted funding should increase demand for special education teachers, teachers serving low-income communities, early childhood educators and teacher performance auditors.

Long-term Prognosis: Since cash-strapped states often cut their education budgets, a prolonged recession could lead to job losses after the stimulus spending is over. Even so, teaching has a solid future beyond the current recession. The Bureau of Labor Statistics characterizes teaching job opportunities from 2006-2016 as "good to excellent," due to the large number of teachers who are expected to retire in this period. Jobs will be plentiful for bilingual teachers, special education teachers, teachers in inner city or rural districts, and teachers in high-demand fields like math and science. If you don't want to earn a teaching certificate, teacher's assistant positions are available with just two years of postsecondary education.

Government

Short-term Outlook: The Obama administration predicts that only 10% of Recovery Act jobs will be in the public sector. But with 3.5 million stimulus jobs projected, that still translates to hundreds of thousands of new government positions. According to Stewart Liff, author of "Managing Your Government Career," "It is clear that the government will be hiring an enormous number of people over the next few years. To put things into perspective, the federal government's official job site, usajobs.gov, is currently listing over 47,000 vacant positions. As the stimulus money flows, we can expect the government to continue to look to hire thousands upon thousands of new employees."

With so much public money being mobilized, auditors, attorneys and investigators will be in particular demand, as the Inspector General's offices in government agencies try to reduce fraud and keep tabs on expenditures. But the stimulus will also create positions for a wide variety of professionals, in fields from healthcare to law enforcement. According to Lily Whiteman, career coach and author of "How to Land a Top-Paying Federal Job," "Federal openings created by the stimulus package include jobs in virtually every profession, and every career level, from interns through executives."

Long-term Prognosis: Administrations and budget priorities change, and demand driven by the current stimulus may be temporary. But other factors could make government work a promising long-term career path. As the aging federal workforce retires, there will be hundreds of thousands of positions to fill in coming years, over and above stimulus-related hiring. And since it's more difficult to terminate a public employee than a private-sector worker, government jobs are considered among the most secure available.

SIDEBAR: The Effects of the Stimulus on Education Costs

Struggling with college costs? Here are three major ways the Recovery Act can help put money in your pocket, as described by Mark Kantrowitz, publisher of financial aid websites FastWeb.com and FinAid.org.

1. The stimulus increases the maximum Pell Grant from \$4,731 to \$5,350 in 2009, and new eligibility requirements mean an additional 800,000 students will qualify. The maximum grant will rise to \$5,550 the following year.
2. It expands the Hope Scholarship tax credit for the 2009/2010 tax years, extending it to millions of additional families.
3. It includes \$200 million for federal work-study, enough for an additional 181,000 recipients.

According to Kantrowitz, financial aid is especially important for community college students. “They are eligible for Pell Grants and Hope Scholarships just like students at four-year institutions. But instead, many of them work full-time while pursuing their education. This limits the amount of time available for studying, and many drop out without obtaining a degree. Applying for federal student aid can help them reduce their work hours and graduate. More than 1.5 million community college students would have qualified for a Pell Grant in 2007-08, but did not submit the application.”

Students can apply for both the Pell Grant and federal work-study funding at www.fafsa.ed.gov. They can claim the Hope Scholarship tax credit on their 2009 and 2010 federal income tax returns.