



Resiliency may be the best job skill today

There are few career 'safe harbors' any longer. Virtually every job is subject to change, either revolutionary or evolutionary. Ability to cope may be the best strategy.

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The November Money magazine contains a sophisticated analysis of the top jobs in America, balancing current employment, long-term growth, pay, security and quality of life. What is important and what is missing from its analysis?

The two top jobs on Money's list are good examples of worthwhile careers, blending the ability to solve complex problems and deal with people. The first, systems engineer, is essentially an engineering program manager, responsible for managing the completion of a large project or ongoing system. Roles like the systems engineer are difficult to outsource or automate, roughly equivalent to a "general contractor" in the construction industry who is responsible for the delivery of the total solution.

The second-most-promising job is a physician's assistant, a medical practitioner who does much of the day-to-day treatment of patients, freeing up (more expensive) medical doctors to treat the minority of more challenging cases. The potential of this career path lies in its alignment with the critical need for more efficient utilization of resources in health care.

What important considerations are missing from the Money Best Jobs study? I think the analysis minimizes the inevitable evolutionary changes in the structure of society and industries, and the disruptive effects of these changes on careers – even prestigious ones.

- Too much health care: Eleven of the top 25 jobs are in health care delivery. Regardless of the outcome of current efforts at health care

reform, the health care system is in for some major changes, with plenty of career implications.

- Too much information technology: Six of the top 25 jobs are in IT. Sure, information technologies will continue to be the foundation of the economy. But it is questionable whether IT jobs will exist in their present form, let alone be performed domestically.

For example, the career path for software developers (No. 12 on the list) has been gutted by the growing trends of offshore outsourcing and SaaS (Software as a Service – the use of software built and hosted by the vendor rather than installed and customized by the customer).

- BA is not be all: The survey deliberately limits itself to jobs that require at least a bachelors degree. Granted, more education equals more earning power in a knowledge-based economy. But there is a growing realization that only a minority of jobs (such as engineers and accountants) actually utilize specific undergraduate training. Increasingly, an undergraduate degree is an all-purpose credential demonstrating one's ability to process large amounts of information.

In contrast, a variety of "blue-collar" technician careers require specialized training (HVAC engineers, for example) and are as lucrative and stable as many "white-collar" jobs.

- White-collars are not invincible: The survey implicitly judges knowledge-based jobs as less vulnerable to threats that have devastated well-paying blue-collar

manufacturing jobs, particularly offshoring, automation and radical industry shifts.

But offshoring has eroded software development careers, not just manufacturing careers. And automation has eliminated entire categories of roles in IT (webmasters, system administrators). Inefficient knowledge-based industries, such as higher education or pharmaceutical sales, will not elude the re-engineering effect of market forces in the long term.

If even the "best jobs" of the future seem less than stable, perhaps we need to redefine the term. If there are few career "safe harbors" remaining, then true stability is rooted in resiliency, the ability to swim through turbulent waters.

How to do this? Part of the answer lies early in the Money article: "When MONEY and Payscale.com surveyed 35,000 people online about what makes a great job, they rated intellectual challenge, a passion for the work and flexibility just as highly as security."

The rapidly changing landscape of society and industry raise the importance of lifelong career growth and exertion. By focusing on work you are passionate about, you are more likely to challenge yourself and invest extra effort in continuous growth throughout your career.

Ultimately, the crux of the knowledge-based economy is crafting analytical solutions of high value to people, whether individuals, organizations or demographic groups. Investments in solving complex problems and dealing with people will be rewarded.

Taking this theme to its logical conclusion, college students who wish to bulletproof their careers are advised to major in statistics and minor in theater. Statistics because analyzing information is becoming the foundation of the knowledge-based economy, particularly as computing grows out of its craft phase into a mature engineering discipline. And theater because understanding the human drama will always be a valuable skill.

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