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Where the jobs are greener

How to prepare for and land the much-touted environment-driven work opportunities

By [Tiffany Hsu](#)
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As the recession has filled jobless centers, the call has grown louder for renewable energy, environmentally gentle products and eco-friendly practices – and for people to make all of that happen.

President Barack Obama has said that he hopes to create 5 million green jobs within a decade.

The job description casts a wide net. The green ranks can include autoworkers who make hybrid cars, building consultants, home energy auditors, environmental studies professors, wind turbine engineers, lawyers for biofuel companies and more.

Some will be new positions; some will involve workers from other industries tweaking their skills.

Here's where to find green jobs, how to prepare for them and how to land a spot.

The rundown. Even before the recession, the green-jobs market was growing at a faster pace than overall employment in most states. The growth rate of green jobs nationwide was 9.1 percent from 1998 to 2007, compared with a 3.7 percent increase for all jobs during the same period, according to a recent report from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Despite the potential of the green industry, the economic rough patch has saturated the job market with applicants. And some researchers caution that the green economy's potential has been exaggerated.

"Indeed, the green-jobs literature claims resemble the promises of long-term financial prosperity offered by Ponzi schemes," said a study, "Green Jobs Myths," released by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Case Western Reserve University.

The range. Green positions run from the predictable, such as eco-activism work, to more unconventional careers.

"Nobody really knows what green jobs are anyway," said Tom Savage, a managing partner at Bright Green Talent, a job-search firm. "There's a whole gradient of color between the greenest jobs and the non-green. But it's more important to get excited that more jobs are greening in general."

Many positions involve skills that can be transferred from other lines of work.

Sometimes, though, switching into a green job can cause culture shock.

Although pulling solar-panel installers and engineers from roofing and construction industries is usually painless, former homebuilders used to high profits can be flummoxed by the low-margin, volume-driven nature of the solar industry, said Angiolo Laviziano, chief executive of REC Solar.

Training. About two-thirds of all energy-efficiency jobs in 2004 were considered middle skill, or requiring less than a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, 13 percent of positions were high skill and 21 percent were low skill, according to a recent report from the Workforce Alliance.

Sometimes, previous experience is a plus, while other companies prefer to train their new hires on site. The nonprofit Solar Energy International has a seven-acre campus in Colorado, online courses and worldwide workshops on sustainable building and transportation, hydro and wind turbine maintenance and more. Community colleges also are feeding the boom.

Choosing an educational program, though, can be like trying to infiltrate a secret society, said Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins, chief executive of Green for All, a group dedicated to creating a clean-energy economy. Caution is key, she said, because some recent training entrants might not have a deep faculty bench and not all jobs require a major investment.

"The skills involved are not as advanced as most people think," she said. "Most can be achieved through a minimal amount of training."

Getting in. Some industries are relatively new and focused on research and development instead of heavy expansion.

But there are open doors even there, experts said. Startups tend to hire in waves as they launch, said Riggs Eckelberry, chief executive of biofuels firm OriginOil Inc. Interested applicants should join networking groups to keep up to date on company debuts and try to slip in via an internship.

"Just get into any company and get some experience on any level," he said. "Don't worry too much about whether the company is going to succeed or blow up, because all those people will create your network."

Successful applicants can also demonstrate their interest by reading about clean tech, renewable energy or the general green market on online forums such as greencollarblog.org.

Informational sessions at industry conventions are helpful, as are visits to companies. "Some of the very best people were proactive and just came up to us and gave us their resumes," said Laviziano of REC Solar. "People who have done their research always impress me."

thsu@tribune.com

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