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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Lots of Jobs Await the Class of 2021. So Does Plenty of Competition.

New grads will have to vie with their unlucky 2020 predecessors as the U.S. economy pulls out of a pandemic-led slump

By [Patrick Thomas](#)

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Dear college graduate:

Congratulations! The good news: You're entering one of the hottest job markets on record in recent years as the U.S. economy pulls out of its pandemic lockdown.

The bad news: The competition is ferocious.

Many of your peers who graduated last year are still trying to find their first big break. People who went back to graduate school to put off job hunting in 2020 are hitting the market alongside you, too.

“The picture for younger workers is complicated,” says Luke Pardue, an economist for Gusto, a payroll and benefits company used by more than 100,000 small-business clients. “They are facing stiff competition from people who have been terminated. Workers on the sideline will come back and compete for these jobs.”

Workers under the age of 25 were terminated during the spread of Covid-19 at rates 79% higher than older workers, according to Gusto data from March 2020 through March 2021. That is partly because the last people hired into a company are often the first ones cut when times get tough.

At least grads now have new positions to vie for. Job postings, which languished through 2020, reached pre-pandemic levels earlier this year, according to job-search platform Indeed. As of mid-April, help wanted ads were 19% higher than they were before U.S. lockdowns took effect in February 2020. The number of jobs listed on Handshake, a job-search site for college students, were up about 81% in March from the prior year.

ON THE HUNT

The top jobs receiving applications from the class of 2021:

- ◆ Data analysts and data scientists
- ◆ Business analysts and management consultants
- ◆ Software developers and engineers
- ◆ Computer and information systems managers
- ◆ Electrical engineers
- ◆ *Source: Handshake*

Not all sectors are hiring equally. The top industries looking to hire new grads were the pandemic's big winners: tech, financial services, education and professional services, according to Handshake data. The most in-demand roles are for software developers, accountants and data analysts. The fewest job listings are in sectors hard hit by the pandemic, including hospitality, retail and natural resources.

“It’s as hot as I’ve seen it in 10 years,” says Keith Wolf, managing director of Houston-based recruiting firm Murray Resources. Job openings for sales positions—an indicator that companies have switched back to growth mode—surged in recent weeks, according to Mr. Wolf. Manufacturing jobs are rebounding, too.

It will take some work to stand out. Experts say grads should practice virtual interviewing, be ready to explain how they spent an unpredictable 2020 and be ready to adapt if their dream job doesn’t materialize.

The virtual world

In a virtual recruiting world, candidates are competing with people from anywhere in the country. So practice virtual interviewing over Zoom with a family member or a friend, clean up all social media pages to look as professional as possible and build a LinkedIn profile if you don't have one, Mr. Wolf says.

The biggest curveball this year with online job interviews is the prerecorded interview, says Vincent Robert Browne, a 21-year old finance major at St. John's University in New York City who is looking for a position as a financial analyst. The practice requires that applicants film themselves answering a list of questions they are sent shortly before they have to appear on video. Nobody is on the other side of the screen in real time, and there is not a lot of time to prep.



Vincent Robert Browne, a finance major at St. John's University, has taken part in several prerecorded interviews online as he looks for a position as a financial analyst.

PHOTO: VINCENT ROBERT BROWNE

Mr. Browne has submitted several such interviews as part of the screening process with potential employers. He says they can be awkward compared with traditional face-to-face discussions that let a job candidate display their charisma and read the body language of their potential boss.

“It’s a little chaotic,” Mr. Browne says. “Those processes have taken away from that human touch aspect.”

One positive change is that it is now easier for companies to reach out to a wider variety of students and schools, several career counselors say. It remains to be seen how permanent these recruiting changes will be, but some firms suggest many elements will stick. Just like the future of work, companies are expected to use a hybrid approach of in-person and remote recruiting, says Lara Abrash, chief executive of Deloitte’s audit business.

How you spent 2020

You should also be ready to explain how you spent 2020, especially if your summer internship disappeared because of the pandemic.

For new hires that didn’t already intern at Deloitte and had their summer job canceled a year ago, Ms. Abrash said the firm is putting more emphasis on other experiences, such as how a student adjusted their plans after an internship was canceled, to gain insight into an applicant.

“People who could talk about how they navigated the last year and a half and how they can portray their resilience is important,” she says. “Adaptability is an important attribute for us.”

When Ryan Vaughters, a communications studies major at Vanderbilt University, had her summer internship at a marketing firm canceled a year ago, she spent the summer taking courses on LinkedIn to learn about programming languages, including SQL. The idea was to bolster her résumé, she says, adding she was still nervous about her job prospects.



‘I was throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something would stick,’ says Vanderbilt University’s Ryan Vaughters, discussing her job search.

PHOTO: KRISTINE POTTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

As graduation loomed, Ms. Vaughters scoured the university’s job board and other websites like Indeed.com. She ultimately found a rotational program for college graduates with Restaurant Brands International Inc. through the site WayUp. The one-year-long temporary opportunity will allow her to work across brands the company owns, including Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, Burger King and Tim Hortons.

“I was looking everywhere,” she says, adding that she hopes the post-pandemic job market becomes clearer by the time her stint is through. “I was throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something would stick.”

Another grad who had to scramble during 2020 was Alexa Levin, who planned to intern at online retail giant Wayfair Inc. before her position was pulled last spring. The industrial and labor relations major at Cornell University says she applied to anything she could find on Handshake and LinkedIn, and reached out to every connection. A friend of her brother was able to help her get an internship in operations at OpenExchange Inc., a videoconferencing software company that was in high demand during the pandemic. Last summer she was able to work long hours, compared with many of her peers' shortened internships, she says.



Alexa Levin, an industrial and labor relations major at Cornell University, had to scramble once her internship was pulled last spring.

PHOTO: ALEXA LEVIN

Ms Levin credits her experience analyzing OpenExchange's relationship with its customers and examining how pricing models performed with helping her secure a full-time job as a strategy analyst at Deloitte. She starts in the fall.

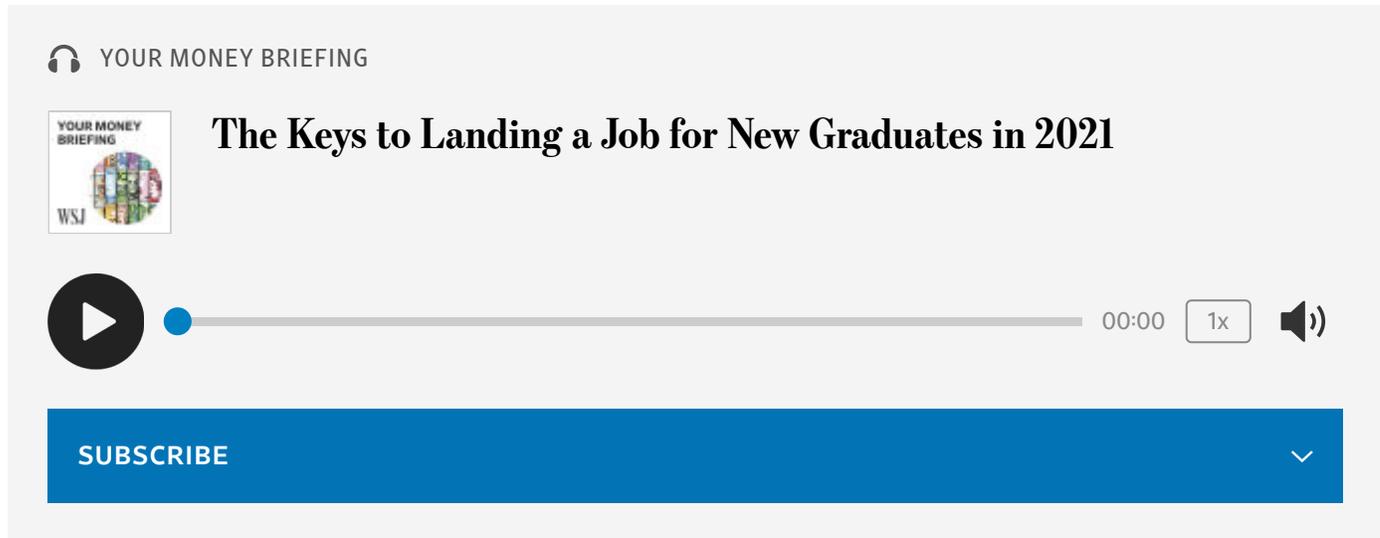
"I do not think I would have gotten a job at Deloitte if I didn't have that internship at OpenExchange. I wouldn't have the skills I needed, even the interviewing experience," she says. "There was so much I learned from my summer that I wouldn't have been as strong of an applicant had I not had that experience."

Forget about the dream job—for now

Stacey Moynahan, an assistant dean of undergraduate programs and business school career services at Chapman University in California, says she's encouraging students not to hold out for their dream job. The biggest mistake some students make is doing nothing,

prolonging their job search, she says. While working hard to find a position, students should also get online certifications, attend webinars or find postgraduate internships.

“You have to be ready when jobs do return,” Ms. Moynahan says. “The ones getting jobs are the ones not letting this slow them down.”



The screenshot shows a podcast player interface. At the top left, there is a headphones icon followed by the text "YOUR MONEY BRIEFING". Below this is a small square thumbnail image with the text "YOUR MONEY BRIEFING" and "WSJ" and a colorful circular graphic. To the right of the thumbnail is the title "The Keys to Landing a Job for New Graduates in 2021" in a bold, black font. Below the title is a play button icon (a white triangle inside a black circle) and a progress bar with a blue dot at the beginning. To the right of the progress bar is the text "00:00", a "1x" speed control button, and a speaker icon. At the bottom of the player is a blue rectangular button with the word "SUBSCRIBE" in white capital letters and a small white downward-pointing chevron icon on the right side.

Christine Cruzvergara, vice president of Higher Education and Student Success at Handshake, says the students from the class of 2021 know they need to be willing to shift industries, be flexible about roles or be open to cities they hadn't previously considered. Students who had been working toward a career in hospitality or aviation may need to figure out what skills they gained that could be put to use in a different sector, Ms. Cruzvergara says.

“This class is grittier, and I think they're also more realistic than previous classes,” she says. “The experience for them has been markedly different from any other class before them.”

A lot of new graduates worry that taking a job outside their dream field can set them back in terms of earnings or future opportunities, but last year's graduates who landed on their feet caution against this kind of thinking.

Christian Williams, 23, graduated from the University of North Carolina in the class of 2020 with a double major in economics and Russian. He says he spent months looking for a job in finance before landing a financial adviser role at a small firm in Atlanta, 49 Financial, in the summer. It wasn't exactly the position he saw himself in long-term, so he kept looking while working. After a few months, he jumped to a new role in October,

working as an investment analyst at IRC Wealth, also based in Atlanta. He calls it his dream job.

“It was crazy back in the second semester in college. I was applying to virtually everything and just trying to find a position. It weighed on my confidence,” Mr. Williams says. “Not even a year later, I ended up in my job, which is what I was hoping to get at 30.”

Jacob Hanni, a senior at West Virginia University who’s majoring in mechanical and aerospace engineering, is considering another niche like manufacturing engineering that may have more openings. He says he decided to push back his graduation until the end of the fall so he can earn more online credentials in python, machine learning, javascript, tableau and HTML5. He hopes to land another summer internship in robotics or systems engineering at a company like Raytheon Technologies Corp. or Northrop Grumman Corp. to broaden his experience.

“In the current market, there isn’t much I envision turning into a long-term career, so I’m picking up some extra credits and making myself more marketable while still in school,” Mr. Hanni says.

Don’t give up

Graduates should keep at their search now that there are some signs that recruiting is picking up, says Jeff Beavers, executive director of Michigan State University’s career-services network. Job postings at Michigan State are up roughly 30% from a year ago, with recruiting ticking up in biotechnology, manufacturing, healthcare and real estate.

“We have seen a major turnaround in the job market, more quickly than we predicted,” he says. “Many employers recruited in the fall semester but then held off on making offers until this spring.”

The auto industry hadn’t recruited as many people from Michigan State as in past years, Mr. Beavers says, so some students who want to work for car companies are pivoting to work for small- to medium-size parts suppliers. “Do more research on opportunities you hadn’t thought about, especially an employer who is tied to their industry or career pathway,” he says.

One new graduate who is taking that advice is Keeley Scott, a senior marketing major at Villanova University, who wants to pursue a career in fashion and beauty. Bothered by the

competitive job market in the fashion industry during the pandemic, she's found work in the cosmetics industry that is similar but not exactly what she initially set out to do.



Keeley Scott landed a part-time role as a creative operations coordinator until she graduates from Villanova University this spring. 'You always need to be doing something to get to the next internship or job.'

PHOTO: HANNAH YOON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

She interned at Mac Cosmetics, a subsidiary of Estée Lauder Co. In January, she emailed her old boss to ask about potential work she could take on. She landed a temporary, part-time role as a creative operations coordinator where she's working on e-commerce marketing designs until graduating later this spring, Ms. Scott said.

"Working part time gives me an extra step on my résumé," she said. "Because it's so competitive and jobs aren't as available as they were two years ago, especially in fashion and beauty, I was interested in anything that combined my interest. You always need to be doing something to get to the next internship or job."

Write to Patrick Thomas at Patrick.Thomas@wsj.com

The Class of 2021 Goes to Work

Read more of the Journal's coverage of the job market for new grads, and advice on landing an entry-level role.

Networking Makes a Comeback



When Rebecca Moser, a 26-year-old MBA student in New York City, first started her postgrad job search, she spent countless hours scrolling postings on Glassdoor and LinkedIn. But her school’s career advisers told her to stop—and to pick up the phone.

How to Dress for a Job Interview

“When done right, your look isn’t the first thing your prospective employer notices,” says Dena Giannini, the style director for British Vogue. “They just notice that you are polished and possess an air of quiet confidence.” Here’s how to pull it off.



Prep for Your First Job Search: A Two-Day Boot Camp

Want to be more employable? New grads can improve their odds of landing a job by spending two days following this practical advice from recruiters and hiring managers.

How to Negotiate Your Salary

Salary negotiation is an art, but there are proven techniques you can use to get what you want.



Catching Up With the Class of 2020

The Class of 2020 was primed to enter one of the most robust job markets in history. Instead, they faced one of the most challenging environments for young people in decades. Things are looking up now, though.

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