

CAREERS JANUARY 6, 2009

Doing the Math to Find the Good Jobs

Mathematicians Land Top Spot in New Ranking of Best and Worst Occupations in the U.S.

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By SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN

Nineteen years ago, Jennifer Courter set out on a career path that has since provided her with a steady stream of lucrative, low-stress jobs. Now, her occupation -- mathematician -- has landed at the top spot on a new study ranking the best and worst jobs in the U.S.



"It's a lot more than just some boring subject that everybody has to take in school," says Ms. Courter, a research mathematician at mental images Inc., a maker of 3D-visualization software in San Francisco. "It's the science of problem-solving."

The study, to be released Tuesday from CareerCast.com, a new job site, evaluates 200 professions to determine the best and worst according to five criteria inherent to every job: environment, income, employment outlook, physical demands and stress. (CareerCast.com is published by Adicio Inc., in which Wall Street Journal owner News Corp. holds a minority stake.)

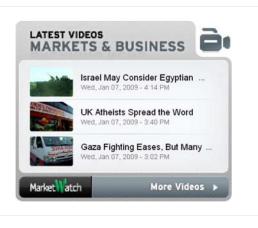
The findings were compiled by Les Krantz, author of "Jobs Rated Almanac," and are based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau, as well as studies from trade associations and Mr. Krantz's own expertise.

According to the study, mathematicians fared best in part because they typically work in favorable conditions -- indoors and in places free of toxic fumes or noise -- unlike those toward the bottom of the list like sewage-plant operator, painter and bricklayer. They also aren't expected to do any heavy lifting, crawling or crouching -- attributes associated with occupations such as firefighter, auto mechanic and plumber.

The study also considers pay, which was determined by measuring each job's median income and growth potential. Mathematicians' annual income was pegged at \$94,160, but Ms. Courter, 38, says her salary exceeds that amount.

Her job entails working as part of a virtual team that designs mathematically based computer programs, some of which have been used to make films such as "The Matrix" and "Speed Racer." She telecommutes from her home and rarely works overtime or feels stressed out. "Problem-solving involves a lot of thinking," says Ms. Courter. "I find that calming."

Other jobs at the top of the study's list include actuary, statistician, biologist, software engineer





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and computer-systems analyst, historian and sociologist.

The Best and Worst Jobs

Of 200 Jobs studied, these came out on top -- and at the bottom:

Of 200 Jobs studied, these came ou	for the Department of	
The Best	The Worst	Agriculture's
1. Mathematician	200. Lumberjack	Economic Research
2. Actuary	199. Dairy Farmer	Service in
3. Statistician	198. Taxi Driver	Washington, D.C. He
4. Biologist	197. Seaman	studies hunger in
5. Software Engineer	196. EMT	American households
6. Computer Systems Analyst	195. Garbage Collector	and writes research
7. Historian	194. Welder	reports about his
8. Sociologist	193. Roustabout	findings. "The best
9. Industrial Designer	192. Ironworker	part of the job is the
10. Accountant	191. Construction Worker	sense that I'm making
11. Economist	190. Mail Carrier	some contribution to
12. Philosopher	189. Sheet Metal Worker	good policy making,"
13. Physicist	188. Auto Mechanic	he says. "The kind of
14. Parole Officer	187. Butcher	stuff that I crank out
15. Meteorologist	186. Nuclear Decontamination Tech	gets picked up by
16. Medical Laboratory Technician	185. Nurse (LN)	advocacy
17. Paralegal Assistant	184.Painter	organizations, media
18. Computer Programmer	183. Child Care Worker	and policy officials."
19. Motion Picture Editor	182. Firefighter	
20. Astronomer	181. Brick Layer	The study estimates
More on the Methodology		sociologists earn

For methodology info and detailed job descriptions, go to http://careercast.com/jobs/content/JobsRated_Methodology See the complete list of job rankings

Read about the last study of the best and worst jobs.

findings because his job generates little stress and he works a steady 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. schedule. "It's all done at the computer at my desk," he says. "The main occupational hazard is carpal tunnel syndrome."

On the opposite end of the career spectrum are lumberiacks. The study shows these workers. also known as timber cutters and loggers, as having the worst occupation, because of the dangerous nature of their work, a poor employment outlook and low annual pay -- just \$32,124.

New protective gear -- such as trouser covers made of fiber-reinforcement materials -- and an increased emphasis on safety have helped to reduce injuries among lumberjacks, says Paul Branch, who manages the timber department at Pike Lumber Co. in Akron, Ind. Still, accidents do occur from time to time, and some even result in death. "It's not a job everybody can do," says Mr. Branch.

But Eric Nellans, who has been cutting timber for the past 11 years for Pike Lumber, is passionate about his profession. "It's a very rewarding job, especially at the end of the day when you see the work you accomplished," he says. Mr. Nellans, 35, didn't become discouraged even after he accidentally knocked down a dead tree and broke his right leg in the process four years ago. "I was back in the woods cutting timber in five weeks," he says.

Other jobs at the bottom of the study: dairy farmer, taxi driver, seaman, emergency medical technician and roofer.

Mike Riegel, a 43-year-old roofer in Flemington, N.J., says he likes working "outside in the fresh air." Since he runs his own business, which he inherited from his father, he can start and end his day early in hot weather or do the opposite when it's cold.

The study estimates roofers earn annual incomes of \$34,164, which Mr. Riegel says is consistent with what he pays new employees. Roofers also ranked poorly because of their hazardous working conditions. "You obviously can't be afraid of heights," says Mr. Riegel, who once fell two stories while working on a rooftop in the rain but luckily landed safely on a pile of soft dirt. "I missed some cement by 10 feet."

Write to Sarah E. Needleman at sarah.needleman@wsj.com

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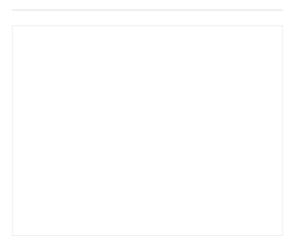
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