



America's 10 Best Places to Find a Job 2009

By Liz Wolgemuth, US News & World Report
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This has, indeed, been the year of government. Several of the nation's state capitals boasted steadier economies than their peers, thanks to the less volatile nature of government employment. These cities also shared other traits: Some possess strong natural resources, housing markets that didn't boom or bust as much as others, growing healthcare sectors, or even close proximity to military bases, which helped boost their local economies.

In the middle of the worst recession in decades, it wasn't easy to pinpoint the Best Places to Find a Job for 2009, as absolutely no American city was immune to the economic downturn. And there have been, no doubt, job seekers as frustrated in these 10 cities as in others. But 2009 was an unusual year. To find the, perhaps, "better" places to find a job, we started with our database of 2,000 cities in all parts of the country. We then narrowed the list to cities that have weathered the recessionary job market and come out with below-average unemployment rates as well as job growth since 2000. We also focused on cities that were large enough to offer job seekers opportunities in a broad sweep of industries. *U.S. News* worked with Onboard Informatics to create the list--Onboard provided the underlying data and algorithm.

Overall, the quality that separates these cities from their peers is not necessarily steep job growth in recent years but a steadiness during the recession that has prevented the sharp employment declines and steep unemployment rates posing such a challenge to dedicated job seekers nationwide.

[Anchorage](#)

As the largest city in an isolated, sparsely populated state, Anchorage residents account for almost half of the total personal income in Alaska, according to the Anchorage Economic Development Corp. This is a young city, where the median age is just about 33, and payrolls continue to grow. Last year, in the depths of the recession, Anchorage officials proudly marked their city's 20th consecutive year of job growth.

For one thing, the city's expansive energy industry helped insulate it from much of the recession. Also, the housing market has not experienced the nation's highs and lows. "I think that we've suffered a little bit, just like everyone else has, just not to the same degree," says Pauline Hofseth, a real estate licensee in Anchorage. Today, moderately priced homes seem to be "flying off the market," Hofseth says.

While the city's crucial tourism and shipping industries have been bruised by the recession, jobs have been added in education and health services, and in government, which represents 20

percent of the city's jobs. Retailers also continue to move into Anchorage: Target, Kohl's, Lowe's, Best Buy, and the Sports Authority have opened new stores.

[Arlington, Va.](#)

Arlington is actually not a city but a county of 26 square miles that's home to the Pentagon and the Arlington National Cemetery. As neighbor to the nation's capital, it's not particularly surprising that the federal government is Arlington's largest employer. The Department of Defense, the National Science Foundation and the State Department are among the employers here.

This concentration in government jobs has, not surprisingly, helped cushion Arlington during the downturn. But the county's economy is not wholly dependent on its proximity to Washington. Private companies have a significant place here as well. Among the largest private employers are US Airways, Booz Allen Hamilton, Lockheed Martin, and Marriott. "We have a number of employers here who are growing even in this economy," says Jennifer Ives, director of business investment for Arlington Economic Development. An excellent public transit system and a variety of housing options tend to lure talented workers--who are a major lure for employers.

[Columbus, Ohio](#)

While some are a bit hesitant to praise their local economy 20 months into a recession, Bill LaFayette, vice president of economic analysis for the Columbus Chamber, has seen the local data and the national averages, and he knows one thing is certain: "We're doing a whole lot better than average," LaFayette says. For one thing, Ohio's capital city is smack in the middle of the state--and pretty central for much of the country--and it boasts a strong transportation and distribution industry. Columbus's distribution employment has grown by a third since 2001, while the rest of the nation, on average, is down.

You can, however, thank the city's diverse economy for much of its resilience. Healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, and even the tech industry contribute plenty of jobs. Some of the city's major employers include Ohio State University, OhioHealth, Nationwide Insurance, JPMorgan Chase, Bob Evans, and Limited Brands. Employment in information technology occupations is significantly higher than in comparably sized regions because "so many of our sectors are voracious consumers of data" and need top-notch IT infrastructure, LaFayette says.

[Honolulu](#)

In the city that a young President Obama once called home, things are looking slightly steadier than in the rest of the nation. Honolulu's unemployment rate hadn't hit 5 percent before the start of 2009, and it's still nestled below 7 percent. Like many cities that have fared better in the recession, Honolulu never experienced much of the housing bubble's burst. Its home values are among the highest in the nation. "We're a little bit better off than the U.S.," says Carl Bonham, a University of Hawaii--Manoa economics professor and executive director of the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization.

Granted, it's not all roses in this Hawaiian state capital. Tourism rules Honolulu's economy, and many of its large employers are hotel chains. The jaw-dropping peak oil prices of last year, plus this recession's pullback in consumer spending, caused pain to the tourism industry nationwide, and Bonham doesn't expect Honolulu's tourism revenues will return to their peak for several years. But government is nearly a quarter of the city's employment, which helps bring stability to the larger economy. As well, the Bank of Hawaii and Queen's Medical Center are among the city's top employers. The most in-demand jobs over the next decade are expected to be in retail, higher education, and nursing.

[Houston](#)

Texas has proved enormously resilient during this recession. The state's economy has performed in stark contrast to the rest of the nation--many counties in the state have even eked out job gains during the downturn. There are a few reasons for the state's strength, and housing was no small factor. "Houses have always been very, very affordable in Texas," says Dave Iaia, managing director of the U.S. Regional Services Group at IHS Global Insight. Unlike nearly all other metros, IHS is projecting that Texas cities will add jobs within the next year. The job markets in Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, and Austin have all been steadier than average nationally.

You can also thank the world's dependence on fossil fuels for the state's success, particularly for the economic health in Houston. Houston is home to 27 *Fortune* 500 companies, including ConocoPhillips and Marathon Oil. While commodity prices have been volatile during the downturn, demand is climbing back up in part thanks to stimulus from overseas and the recovering U.S. economy, according to a report by the Dallas Fed. Like other steady cities, healthcare is an important part of Houston's economy. For example, the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Medical Center, one of the nation's top hospitals, employs more than 17,000 workers in Houston.

[Oklahoma City](#)

This capital city has gotten its fair share of the spotlight in this recession, as its job market has powered through the peak of the recession with a 6 percent unemployment rate--one of the country's lowest. Energy is a big driver of the city's stability. Oklahoma boasts rich resources of oil and natural gas that yield strong industry in construction, resources, and mining. When commodity prices were high earlier in the recession, Oklahoma City resisted job losses entirely. Now, employment is down slightly from its peak, but it is projected to return to the peak as soon as two years earlier than the national average, according to Bob Tomarelli of IHS Global Insight.

The strongest near-term growth will come from the professional and business services sector and the healthcare sector, Tomarelli says. Indeed, the city's economic expansion following the 2001 recession was broadly based. Local government and mining jobs grew the most rapidly. The city's economy has also been helped by the presence of the Tinker Air Force Base and nearby Oklahoma State University.

[Salt Lake City](#)

Salt Lake City has squeezed through the recession with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation--now still below 6 percent. However, Utah traditionally has an unemployment rate lower than the rest of the nation, so it's important to evaluate the city's job market with a few different criteria. Home values actually appreciated in 2008, and although prices dropped in the first quarter--by less than 5 percent--they are still about 20 percent higher than in the first quarter of 2006.

Salt Lake City boasts a diversified economy and is another spot rich in natural resources, including the one of the world's largest copper mines. The city's largest employers include Brigham Young University and the University of Utah, Intermountain Healthcare, and the Utah state government.

[Shreveport, La.](#)

It's quite possible that sometime in the future when you're watching Columbia Pictures' film *Battle: Los Angeles*, you'll be spying the scenery of Shreveport, rather than Southern California. Thanks to a thick package of tax incentives, Louisiana boasts one of the nation's most thriving film production industries. After Hurricane Katrina, Shreveport embraced filmmakers who had been forced out of New Orleans but still wanted to capture state tax incentives, and launched a new industry for its workers. "We've easily had 60 film projects in the last three years," says Kurt Foreman, president of North Louisiana Economic Partnership, a regional economic development group.

Entertainment, such as gaming, is no small industry in this city, which has worked hard to recover from harder times. Leisure and hospitality employment has actually grown in the past 12 months. Shreveport also has a new \$100 million convention center, the stabilizing force of Barksdale Air Force Base, and Louisiana State University-Shreveport.

Economists at IHS Global Insight expect Louisiana will have lost just 2 percent of its jobs by the end of the recession and will have returned to its prerecession peak by 2012. The state will be in the top four for fewest jobs lost, according to IHS. One significant development is Haynesville Shale, a Jurassic-age rock settlement that may be the largest deposit of natural gas in the continental United States. More than \$3 billion has already been paid out in land leases and royalties. "We're sort of blessed with a lot of things at once," Foreman says.

[Tallahassee, Fla.](#)

Florida may not seem an ideal spot to land post-recession, given that the state's housing market was among the most extreme to boom and bust. But the unemployment rate in the state's capital city is still 3 percentage points below the state average. Tallahassee has seen job growth in education and health services, leisure and hospitality, and in the government sector. "It has fared better than a lot of other cities," says Laurie Hartsfield, executive director of the Knight Creative Communities Institute at Tallahassee Community College. "A lot of it has to do with being a state capital."

While the government sector is responsible for nearly a third of the city's employment, the city has also been helped by its universities--Florida State University and Florida A&M are both based in Tallahassee--as well as an economy driven largely by small businesses that may not have contracted as much in the recession, says J. Michael Pate, a program director for the Knight Foundation.

Wichita, Kan.

The Wichita housing market has resisted the wild swings in value that have done so much damage to other U.S. cities. The city even managed to add jobs last year.

Wichita's modern-day economy is still closely aligned with its past, when it earned the title "air capital." From the time local workers labored to build the Cessna Comet in 1917, aviation has been important to the city. Boeing, Cessna, and Hawker Beechcraft maintain a strong presence. While the aviation industry has been affected by the downturn, the local skill sets in Wichita are highly technical and specialized, so the industry's recovery portends a strong opportunity for the city to grow in the future, says Jeremy Hill, director of the Center for Economic Development and Business Research. In the meantime, Wichita's healthcare sector may be the strongest in the state--education and health services employment has risen 4 percent in the past year.