

PrediXions - The National Labour Market Information Service

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Dear Fred,

You asked about labour market information. I have been, I am and I will be a client of careers guidance and career development services. By courtesy of these mostly public services, I have at my disposal a continuously updated National Labour Market Information Service, which has a particular title as you see and which in our country is designed for the use of the population at large. I can access this service on the Web through our digital TV set in the lounge at home or through any PC screen at any of the information points in public centres, large stores, libraries and the like throughout the town. In the schools and colleges it gets projected on to wall-screens whenever our children have work-related education sessions, civic studies or lessons about economic developments and the like. It is useful. It is even more useful when careers experts are present and can underline pieces of information particularly relevant to any one of us as individuals. They use the same information source and are very familiar with the changes taking place, on a day-by-day basis.

The opening screen is an introduction to the service in simple, plain language, which tells you what it is, what it contains and how to use it. We usually skip these pages now but there is a useful flashing icon which tells you about any significant changes or new developments in the service. Pressing the "NEXT" button gives you a choice of different pathways to follow, depending on what the questions are which you have in mind at the moment. You can choose:

- National and Global – which deals with longer-term changes happening over something like a ten-year period. These are mostly structural changes in work and training and gives you a chance to see how things are developing in other countries as well.
- Regional – which gives you information about the trends in demand and supply in whatever region of the country you care to select. It's a sort of snapshot about what is going up and down in opportunities over a five-year period. Invariably, we go for trends in our own region but the children get curious and look elsewhere when they decide they are going to live in Cornwall or somewhere, usually after some sort of altercation with their parents!
- Local – and here you are given two options, which relate to a chosen travel to work area, in any part of the country. You can select either 'Annual Recruitment Expectations' or 'Vacancies Now'. The 'Annual Recruitment Expectations' route tells you about what is expected to arise as vacancies and opportunities from the patterns of the last year or two in that area. Ella said this was particularly useful when she was coming up to her 'last year at school'. And 'Vacancies Now' is in fact a sort of employment agency service, with live vacancies or opportunities available in the district – or in any other district you choose to look at.

So that provides the initial options, which are time-related in the sense that they reflect the urgency or otherwise of any decisions you are thinking of making. I should point out that in all four of these routes, the individual entries contain information about job vacancies or training opportunities or courses of vocational

education. It's all there but you can opt if you wish to search on just the job vacancies or the college places, etc. I once heard it suggested in expert circles that actual vacancies, available today, was not what was really meant by 'labour market information'. It used to be regarded as a separate system – but as far as I'm concerned it's very real labour market information and one of the most interesting parts of the service. It isn't necessarily because one is thinking about a job change right now. Out of curiosity, our children often wander up and down the screen looking at the salary scales and the perks. Because it is immediate information: if you are 'on line', you can press buttons at any particular vacancy or opportunity on offer and get an enquiry form or application form sent off by e-mail in the usual way. I have only done this a couple of times, but you get two types of response. Sometimes, you get a direct response from whoever is offering the vacancy, and sometimes you get a reply from the 'Co-ConneXions' Service, which is presumably when the employer or whatever is setting some sort of filter in between the advert and the response. One of the good things about this searching on different main options is that, when you are into any particular entry, you can use an icon on the screen to switch directly between the very short-term and the longer-term types of information.

Whichever route you choose, when you first get into the labour market information itself, the options are not classified under job titles or industry title. Instead you have to choose from what is called a 'Vocational Skills Focus'. I've put a copy of these for you on the accompanying chart. As you see, this gives you seven main types of vocational skills to consider. If you are

Vocational Skills Focus

PRACTICAL SKILLS		INFORMATION SKILLS		PEOPLE SKILLS		PERFORMANCE SKILLS
A Practical and Scientific - Material Things	B Practical and Scientific - Living Things	C Organisation of Information	D Dealing with Ideas and Concepts	E Duty of Care	F Duty of Service	G Performance and Arts
Making, Building, Installing, Operating, Testing, Repairing, Maintaining, Measuring, Calculating, Protecting, Driving, Loading – with machines, materials, equipment and structures, Researching and Creating new understandings and things in the material world	Growing, Nurturing, Looking after, Operating-on, Healing, Harvesting, Treating, Preventing diseases of – plants, animals and living tissues, Caring for the natural environment, Creating and Applying new understandings in the world of living things	Obtaining, Storing, Retrieving, Checking, Manipulating, Entering, Organising, Monitoring, Preparing, Presenting, Translating, Conveying, Scheduling, Classifying – information and data, Managing and Creating new solutions to solve complex problems of organisation	Visualising, Analysing, Evaluating, Illustrating, Formulating, Designing, Developing – for concepts and strategies, Producing plans, charts and graphical representations, Researching and Creating new models and ideas for organisation, products or services	Helping, Caring, Empathising, Assessing and Diagnosing, Showing warmth, Counselling, Being sensitive and supporting – interacting with individuals or groups who need personal support, Encouraging independence, Creating new understandings, dispositions and behaviours	Advising, Informing, Welcoming, Assisting, Explaining, Communicating verbally and in writing, Influencing, Interpreting, Promoting and selling, Persuading, Coaching, Advocating, Negotiating – with individuals or groups who require a service, Creating new understandings and attitudes	Performing to entertain, enlighten or compete – in drama, sport, music, speech, fine arts, creative writing, dance and other means of human expression, Creating new works, designs and ideas in performance and the arts

Within the processes of careers education and guidance – and of employers' recruitment and selection – each 'Vocational Skills Focus' is interpreted at each of the five NVQ related levels of performance. Each 'type' and 'level' of skill, thus defined, may then be placed in a particular 'Industry Setting', the classification of industries used by National Training Organisations. Specific opportunities for employment or training may then be further defined as a Job Title and description, for a given set of circumstances.

starting training for work for the first time, like a school leaver, or even if you are going for some sort of deep specialism, then it is possible that you would choose only one of these skill areas as your main focus. On the other hand, people who have had some experience are much more likely to select a combination of two or perhaps even three of these main areas. So there is a range of the more usual combinations to choose from as well. Altogether, there's about thirty main options or combinations to select from. Anything more subtle than that and you'd have to probe separately into several choices. I have had jobs in the past where one could honestly say that there was a certain amount of all seven of these contained in them somewhere. But if asked which were the dominant skill areas, those which were the essential first base, then I'd have no difficulty in picking those out also. It's very much a pragmatic approach but there are few people familiar with an

occupation who cannot immediately identify the two, very occasionally three, key skill areas for any one specific job. Whilst on the subject of 'key skills', there's no attempt in this classification to include what is called the basic skills or generic skills, which go across the board in all skill areas and at different levels. If these need to be emphasised then this information is included within the text of a particular entry.

So that gets you as far as choosing the main type or types of skill area you want to look at. You then get another choice, which is to select the level of that skill you want to look at. Here you get five choices which are related to the NVQ levels and their academic equivalents, if I dare use that word in NVQ speak. Now you've got a type of work and a level of work selected, which includes training opportunities or vocational education courses as I said earlier. You can now scroll down a host of

individual entries which carry job titles with them as well as identifying the industry in which the particular opportunity is set. Of course, when you are using the Regional or the National/Global search routes, the information given about trends is of a more general nature but nevertheless also refers to particular jobs with their titles and industries. It is also sectionalised, so that you don't have to scroll down screen after screen until you come to the bit you want.

I've mentioned this business about being able to press buttons to get into other related programs or information sources. In 'PrediXions', when you are into any particular labour market information entry, there are a set of search options down the side of the main screen. This gives you a chance to search a particular file in front of you on the basis of a job title or a particular industry setting if you wish. You can also search for information on the basis

of specific salary ranges, or where flexitime options are offered or child care facilities are made available. There are a number of these specific search routines. They change over time and as bright ideas emerge but these are always sign-posted at the first entry screen to the service if something different or new is possible. At each skills focus and level section you get into, there are also icons on screen which can link you directly across into other websites like the Ufi site or the colleges and universities, the National Training Organisations and careers information encyclopedia-type sites. Some of these links are very clever and they take you to that part of another website which relates to the skill focus and level area which you are looking at in 'PrediXions'.

I have to admit that it took a little while to get used to this idea of searching out work options on the basis of the skills involved instead of familiar job titles. I say 'familiar' but the way things are changing, half the job titles I see bounced around these days I have never even heard of, even in my own present industry! And I can appreciate now how job titles can carry with them some very old-fashioned stereotypes in most people's minds. I've come across jobs with exactly the same job title but where the skills mix can be entirely different and vice versa. The biggest bonus though is coming across examples of a particular skills focus being in demand in jobs and industries I previously knew little about. As they say, skills are now far more transferable or portable across all sorts of different industries. Young Max – still very competent in the maths and physics area but most disinclined to become an 'oink engineer' as he called it – changed his mind somewhat when he searched these skill areas, at my insistence, but against his current preference for the 'entertainment industry'. In the 'PrediXions' Service, when you get into the skill focus and skill level choices, there are 'Help' buttons, which are good explanations about what it all means and the factors likely to arise in making a selection. They even have video clips and careers teacher chat stuff, if you're used to that sort of thing.

I don't know too much about it, although I'm grateful for the effort, but it would seem this National Labour Market Information Service relies heavily on what was known as 'joined up thinking'. All the information for the two 'Local' routes to information has to be continuously and directly fed in from every one of the travel-to-work districts. The regional information is distilled and entered at the regional level and all the national and global stuff comes from the 'Co-ConneXions' lot at the central Government Department for Education and Industry. The information we take for granted, therefore, comes from all over the place, though I suppose that having four distinct files makes it easier to manage the updating. What I like about it though is that this national effort seems to work bottom upwards, so that what starts out at people's ground level reality gets progressively put together into the regional and national trends as well. There must be some very smart types somewhere working back down again to pick up the predictions about the way the labour market is moving – hence, no doubt, the title. The ICT boffins I know say that it isn't any big deal by way of technology, though they'll admit it's complex by volume of information. Almost as complex as the National Insurance system but not quite.

The real achievement was getting all the agencies and bureaucracies to work together. Employers and their organisations now have a commonly accepted way of describing work in terms of skills needs and gaps. Career guidance experts are also now using exactly the same 'Vocational Skills Focus' language when they are recording the career choices and destinations of the younger part of the population. That has meant that qualitative and quantitative comparisons can routinely be made between what the country's economy would appear to need and what the newcomers to the labour market are actually choosing to do. These in their turn get fed back into the labour market information service itself and into the

'careers education' provided in the schools and the planning of 'post-school' provision. A virtuous circle – bingo! The youngsters in schools take it for granted now that they will first consider the broad choice of a 'skills focus', then go into debate about the level of those skills they think they could reach and finally the industry setting in which they would like to use those skills. Understanding the distinction between the skills they could use and the different industries where they could use them is quite an eye opener for some. Only lastly comes the choice of a selection of specific job titles, as and when they get to that stage. Very young kids often start with job titles, of course, but in working their way back into the skills categories, I think they learn an awful lot more than we ever did about options in the labour market.

Having a single national service like this gives it an enormous presence in the lives of ordinary people. And joy of joy, it's a one-stop shop. I don't have to go trailing around hundreds of different sites any more when I'm in a career mood. It's all accessible from one place which starts with labour market reality and then links back into all the specialist sites if I need them. It's easy to use when you've tried it once or twice and of course all the youngsters leaving school these days have been tapping into it regularly for the last three years or so. The whole debate about changing skills needs in the new and global economy used to be a bit of a mystery to most folk. It was the sort of chat that economists and HRD people had. Now it's different. Everyone seems to be more familiar with what the score is in the job market and people even talk about their 'skills portfolio'. No-one uses 'PrediXions' on a daily basis, except the 'Co-ConneXions' people perhaps, but it's there like Yellow Pages. As a service for ordinary people in ordinary language and available all over the place, I think it's great. Don't you think so too?

Yours,

Terry