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Two-year degrees and certificate programs can give job-hunters an edge

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Photo provided to The Miami Herald

Sadie Fox became a pharmacy technician, by completing a certification program at Everest University. Before, the high school graduate could only find minimum-wage jobs as cashier or clerk.

Let's face it: The workplace hasn't been the same for a while, ever since overly creative minds generated several boom-and-bust phenomena that today have us all doing mental cartwheels as to how best to fit in the new but unimproved economy.

The good news is that there is still an economy, and believe it or not, some sectors of it are poised for growth. If your industry is shrinking or your occupation has become a dead-end path, a look at jobs that are in hot demand might give you the glimpse of a new alternative horizon.

You might have most of the required education already and need only some

additional courses or an industry certificate to boost your credentials and make you eligible. Or you might be trying to get into a more professional level of employment, but the prospect of pursuing a four-year college degree in order to get a job with some future trajectory seems daunting, because of the time and financial commitment a typical degree involves.

To that end, a growing array of school training geared toward specific industries — particularly growing industries such as healthcare, information technology and logistics — can be completed in two years or less and set you at the doorstep of a new job. Such programs are proliferating as both public and private schools fine-tune training and curricula constantly, in order to match the skills of their graduates with those that employers are increasingly seeking.

Consider: The number of jobs requiring more than a high school degree but less than the typical four-year bachelor's degree will increase at the same rate — about 18 percent — as the number of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree, according to figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The trend favored Sadie Fox, who was a single mother of two small children when she decided to become a pharmacy technician, by completing an education program offering

that certification. Before, the high school graduate could only find minimum-wage jobs as cashier or clerk. Now a pharm tech for Publix, she uses her specialized skills in preparing and dispensing medications, while finding a professional outlet for her people skills.

The program she completed at Everest University trains students for all kinds of pharmacies, but tries to match them with jobs in the pharmacy environments they prefer. For Fox, that was in a retail pharmacy rather than in a hospital or nursing home or mail order setting.

“For me it was retail because I like dealing with people,” Fox said. “In a hospital pharmacy, you just prepare the meds. In retail, you get to talk to people, to interact with them.” Her salary? “A whole lot better. We’re talking double.”

Everest’s pharm tech program is only one of a myriad of choices offered in institutions throughout South Florida, including the multiple campuses of Miami Dade College and Broward College, whose industry-specific programs keep expanding and innovating, while affordability remains one of their hallmarks.

Miami Dade College, for example, has identified one sector in which it wants to begin offering an associate degree soon — logistics. The college, which already offers some courses in logistics, is discussing the curricula that will go into a full-fledged associate degree and is seeking funding sources with the goal of having a degree program as soon as January.

The impetus for adding this degree?

“Miami-Dade ranks No. 1 for air cargo, Port of Miami is leading for cruise line passenger traffic and for container traffic, and Port of Miami unveiled a \$2 billion plan to continue tunnel construction and for dredging,” said Thania Rios, associate dean of MDC’s School of Business. “Also, \$6 billion is being spent on Miami International Airport, including new cargo facility and warehouse space.”

Who’s going to keep all those facilities lighted and at the right temperature? Among them will be Victor Del Cid, a 27-year-old father of four who went from banking clerk to power plant electrician in two years, boosting his entry-level salary to about \$45,000. He underwent a specialized two-year program that Miami Dade College began offering five years ago in conjunction with Florida Power and Light, to equip workers with the engineering skills necessary to run the Turkey Point nuclear power plant.

“The technical nature of the work and FPL being a big company, I had an idea that the compensation would be good and that there’d be opportunity for growth,” said Del Cid, who started at the plant as an apprentice three months after graduation in 2009, and now is a plant electrician, currently gaining supervisory experience for his next promotion.

Not everyone is into technical jobs, and not all job-preparatory programs are technical. Broward College has had a successful legal assistant program for years. This year the college made it even more comprehensive by administering a test from the National Association for Legal Assistants. Although not required by the state of Florida, the test is an objective measure employers can use to assess the competency of people who have

gone through paralegal training. As such, some people already working as legal assistants take the exam to further demonstrate their mettle and negotiate higher salaries.

"I tell my students the test is a mini Bar exam," said Cheryl-Dene Spring, a practicing lawyer and professor at Broward College. "It really gives them the recognition that they can provide quality legal service. I'm an attorney, when I hire this is one of the type of things that I look for."

So if your industry seems to be disappearing, your occupation has become thankless or the economy tanked before you had your first job, take a look at industries where the jobs keep showing up. Depending on your situation and how much education you have completed, it might be a matter of taking an exam, a few courses, a certificate, or a combination. For some ideas, below are five professional-ranking jobs in growing demand that can get you started or suggest a path for further advancement. The cost of training at public colleges shown below is for Florida residents, and would be higher for non-residents.

Job: Pharmacy Technician

Salary range: \$27,000 to \$42,000

Training /certificate needed: Technical certificate that includes specialized pharmacy technician coursework leading to state-issued certification. Can be combined with an associate degree.

Cost of training: Can range from about \$3,000 for the certificate program at a public college like Miami Dade College or Broward College, to about \$19,000 in a private program such as Everest University. Individual courses at Broward or Miami Dade colleges cost about \$300 each.

What it involves: The pharmacy technician works under direct supervision of a licensed pharmacist, helping run the pharmacy according to the policies and procedures of different kinds of environments, from retail store pharmacies to hospital pharmacies. Programs to get the training necessary usually involve temporary placement in an actual pharmacy to get on-the-job experience, and which serves as an on-the-job interview to actually get hired.

Job prospects: Employment of pharmacy technicians is projected to increase 32 percent nationwide between 2010 and 2020, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In Florida, job openings for pharmacy technicians are projected to grow 28 percent between 2008 and 2018, according to figures from the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation. Aging population, longer life expectancies, new treatments and technology are driving growth in the healthcare industry, in turn creating demand for related occupations like pharmacy technicians.

Learn more: www.pharmacytechnician.salarydata.com

Job: Legal Assistant or Paralegal

Median salary: \$46,810.

Training/certificate needed: An [associate degree in paralegal studies](#) with a certificate from a recognized paralegal program is required for many entry-level paralegal positions, although some employers might hire prospects who have taken only a certificate program offered in a business school. Conversely, some law firms will require four years of paralegal studies plus certification.

Cost of training: About \$300 per course at Broward College or Miami Dade College, or about \$7,000 for the 64-credit associate degree. Costs would be higher at private business schools and universities, including Nova Southeastern University.

What it involves: The legal assistant's or paralegal's work (the two terms are often used interchangeably) will vary depending on the specializations of the law firm. The legal assistant performs much of the work of case preparation that a lawyer would otherwise do, such as legal research, document preparation and witness coaching. However, there are a few things that a paralegal cannot undertake, such as present cases in court, sign documents or officially advise clients. Paralegals also can work in the legal departments of companies and organizations.

Job prospects: Legal occupations will increase by about 131,000 between 2010 and 2020, representing a growth rate of 11 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This growth reflects continued demand for legal services from government, individuals and businesses. Paralegals and legal assistants are expected to account for 46,900 new jobs nationwide in that time period, as legal establishments attempt to reduce costs by assigning these workers more tasks that were once performed by lawyers. In Florida, openings for legal assistants or paralegals are projected to increase 24 percent between 2008 and 2018, according to the Agency for Workforce Innovation. There are job opportunities for paralegals other than working in law firms, as many corporations and organizations also employ paralegals, where they have various legal duties.

Learn more: www.paralegalsalaryfactsheet.com

Job: Computer Support/Network Support Specialist

Median salary: \$46,260

Training/certificate needed: An associate degree with specialized courses on the ins and outs of computer networks and computer servers will get you in the door. Obtaining industry certifications and taking more continuing education courses in the constantly-evolving field of information technology will boost your qualifications for advancement.

Cost of training: About \$7,000 for the full associate degree program at Broward or Miami Dade College, or about \$300 per course.

What it involves: There is a wide range of computer support jobs, some more geared to helping users interact successfully with different software, and others geared to helping install, configure and support an organization's network, and yet others combining both, depending on how big is the organization's IT department.

Job prospects: Computer and information technology occupations are projected to grow by 22 percent, adding 758,800 new jobs from 2010 to 2020, according to the U.S. Bureau of

Labor Statistics. Businesses and all kinds of other organizations will continue to rely on computer technology for an increasing number of functions, increasing demand for workers in these occupations. Network technicians in particular will be needed to increase cyber-security and update existing network infrastructure.

Learn more: www.bls.gov/ooh/computer-and-information-technology/computer-support-specialists.htm

Job: Logistician

Starting salary range: \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year

Training/certificate needed: Associate degree with courses in logistics and supply chain management.

Cost of training: About \$7,000 for an associate degree in Miami Dade College, or about \$300 for each 3-credit course.

What it involves: Logisticians analyze and coordinate how products move from supplier to consumer, including how the product is acquired, distributed, allocated and delivered. Miami Dade College already offers some courses related to this specialty, such as introduction to transportation and logistics, introduction to international logistics, and inventory and warehouse management.

Job prospects: Employment in transportation and warehousing is expected to increase by 20 percent during the 2010–2020 decade, adding about 853,000 jobs to the industry total. Truck transportation is anticipated to grow by 24 percent, and the warehousing and storage sector is projected to grow by 26 percent. Demand for truck transportation and warehousing services will expand as global trade grows and more goods are transported into and around the country. South Florida, an ever-growing international hub for cargo transit and storage, will be one of the regions in the country directly connected to this growth.

Learn more: <http://cscmp.org>

Job: Power Plant Electrician

Starting salary range: \$45,000 to \$50,000

Training/certificate needed: Associate Degree in Electrical Power Technology

Cost of training: About \$7,000 at Miami Dade College

What it involves: This is a two-year program that Miami Dade College runs in conjunction with Florida Power & Light, to train electricians to work in FPL's Turkey Point Nuclear Power Plant. An aptitude exam is required before entering the program. Students select a specialty within the program: instrumentation control, electrical maintenance or mechanical maintenance. Coursework, which is tailored according to the specialty, is similar to the courses freshman and sophomore engineer majors would take.

Job prospects: FPL developed this program to train new employees to replace an aging workforce in the nuclear power plant. This year, Miami Dade College graduated its fifth class to undergo the program, with a total of 41 students. "They hire the best candidates that they can find," said Richard White, director of MDC's school of engineering. "Some years they hire all of them." The program's curricula conform to national standards, so graduates are qualified to work in other nuclear power plants besides Turkey Point.

Learn more: www.nei.org

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