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The Five Second Commute

Amid the economy's many ailments, some good news has remained mostly off the radar: The at-home work force is growing, and it is encompassing new occupations ranging from radiology and nursing to auditing and teaching.

The bad news: Fierce competition means your odds of landing one of these jobs are poor. And if you succeed, you will probably take a pay cut.

For companies, home-based employees, independent contractors and freelancers are helping cut costs and improve customer service. Full-time, home-based freelancers and independent contractors in the U.S. are expected to increase by 200,000 workers to 11 million by the end of 2009, says Ray Boggs, a vice president of IDC, Framingham, Mass., a market-research firm; he sees another 200,000-worker increase in 2010.

While that is a mere blip on the radar in an economy that has been losing nearly that many jobs in a month, the trend means a lot to the individuals who are benefiting from it. They are avoiding dreaded commutes, doing volunteer work, pursuing college degrees or caring for family. And they are performing increasingly complex tasks from home, from reading MRIs to helping clients search for Bigfoot, the mythic wilderness monster.

"We are seeing a general broadening of the work-at-home landscape," says Christine Durst, chief executive of a work-at-home Web site and co-author of a new guidebook on the topic.

Applicants are stacking up by the hundreds of thousands, however. Based on my survey of a dozen companies that use home workers, your odds of actually landing one of these positions range from about 25-to-1 to 300-to-1.

ARO Contact Center, Kansas City, Mo., which employs just 200 home auditors and sales and customer-service workers, gets 1,000 resumes a week, says Michael Amigoni, chief operating officer. West Corp., Omaha, with 14,000 active agents handling customer-service and other calls, hires only 0.5% to 1% of its 4,500 weekly applicants. And Alpine Access, Denver, with 2,800 home customer-service, sales and tech-support agents, hires about only 2% of the 100,000 people who apply each year.

"It takes a lot of luck to get these positions," says Tammie Deweever, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., a home customer-service agent for LiveOps, Santa Clara, Calif. "You have to be good at what you do." Ms. Deweever has a college degree in marketing and worked as a mortgage broker before joining LiveOps last January. For her, job flexibility means being able to be home for her

children, 17, 15 and 8; she often works split shifts around their needs, answering calls from TV viewers wanting to buy products from juicers to jeans.

Many skilled at-home professionals and managers earn less than a corporate salary. Less-skilled customer-service or sales work usually pays about \$8 to \$15 an hour, ranging as high as \$25 or more with incentives or premiums. Some companies pay by the minute or hour spent on the phone, while others pay by the shift. The jobs vary by company from full-time employee positions with benefits to part-time independent contractor positions.

And applicants must be wary of scam artists. Ms. Durst, Woodstock, Conn., who screens work-at-home pitches for her Web site, RatRaceRebellion.com, says she is finding only one legitimate job among every 60 pitches she examines. In 2006, the odds weren't quite as bad: She was finding one legitimate job for every 31 pitches vetted.

Many victims of work-at-home fraud have sent money, only to receive worthless products or leads, or nothing at all, in return; others who disclose too much personal information have fallen victim to theft from credit-card or checking accounts.

But those who win the work-at-home lottery reap diverse benefits. Intent on avoiding a long commute, Heather Hedden, a Raleigh, N.C., marketing specialist, spent a year looking for her current spot, as a home-based concierge for VIPdesk, Alexandria, Va. The position was worth the wait, she says. She enjoys using her research skills to help clients find theater or sports tickets, vintage wines or travel services. When a client asked for help looking for Bigfoot, she found an outfitter with a track record of taking like-minded customers on hikes through areas of reported sightings, she says.

After 19 years in private practice, radiologist Steven Brick, Potomac, Md., began working from home for [Virtual Radiologic](http://VirtualRadiologic.com), Eden Prairie, Minn. The setup confers both the freedom to focus on his work, without distractions, and the flexibility to serve as a volunteer at the National Zoo answering visitors' questions, he says. Virtual Radiologic's radiologists, who work as independent contractors reading X-rays and other images for hospitals and other medical clients, have increased to 140 from 34 in 2004, a spokeswoman says.

Home-based work enables newlywed Stacey Anderson, 30, Ballston Spa, N.Y., to tackle numerous roles. Since landing a customer-service post last summer as a contractor for VIPdesk, Ms. Anderson has been able to bend her work hours around her husband's rotating shifts on his job. In addition, she squeezes in a full-time course load as a college student.

Such intangible incentives are drawing skilled, experienced people. Mark Frei, a senior vice president of West, says 80% of West's home agents have some college education, compared with 30% of those who work in office-based call centers.

Vanessa Torres, 35, San Antonio, Texas, had a bachelor's degree in business and 16 years' management experience before signing on last January as a home agent for West. She likes controlling her hours, and works only when her two young children are in school, she says.

Expansion of home-based work is likely to continue. Among the 12 companies I contacted, all were planning to recruit more home workers. [Lionbridge Technologies](#), Waltham, Mass., a provider of multilingual services including translation and product testing, is taking on new freelancers to assess "search relevance"—that is, to ensure Internet searches yield items suitable to particular locales, a spokeswoman says.

Alpine Access, Denver, is recruiting 500 more home agents and expects to add 2,000 in 2010, says Chief Executive Christopher Carrington. LiveOps, with 20,000 home agents for retailing, insurance and other companies, added about 4,000 agents in the past two months. Arise Virtual Solutions, Miramar, Fla., with a home-agent pool of 9,800, is seeking 3,000 agents for the peak holiday and cruise seasons, a spokeswoman says. Michael DeSalles, an analyst with Frost & Sullivan, a research and consulting firm, sees home agents growing by at least 30% a year.

Sites which link clients with skilled freelancers also are seeing a surge in demand for virtual workers with a widening range of professional and technical skills; [oDesk.com](#)'s monthly postings, including graphic design, software, administrative and other projects, rose to 28,000 in the past 30 days, three times year-earlier levels. Monthly hiring on [Elance.com](#) is up more than 40% from a year ago.

As more companies allow people to work from anywhere via the Internet, says a spokeswoman for Lionbridge, "we are convinced that this is the new model of work."