

During periods of economic downturn, career security can suddenly take on huge significance

By Barbara Oaff

History shows some jobs are more recession-proof than others. So, what are they? And if you are not lucky enough to have one now, how difficult will it be to land one in the future? In the coming months these are the kinds of questions thousands may be asking themselves if they feel the cold wind of company cutbacks.

Even before the events of September 11, the UK economy was in trouble. The difference today is that doubts over whether we were headed for a full-blown recession are turning into a grim sense of expectation.

After the attack on America, one economic forecaster downgraded Britain's projected GDP for 2002 by 1.2 per cent – that insignificant sounding percentage could mean a real drop of about £16billion.

Barely a day goes past now without some cuts being announced. The result is increasing job insecurity. According to research by newmonday, a pan-European recruitment agency, a quarter of the UK's workforce are afraid of losing their jobs.

Managing director Roderick Wijismuller says this sentiment is felt by "workers of all asges and in all sectors".

But such fears may be misplaced. Douglas McMillan, chief executive for the Centre for Business and Economic Research, says: "A recession will not affect the vast majority of jobs. Because we are surrounded by all this doom and gloom everyone believes what has happened to one person is going to happen to them, but that is just not the case."

Things may not even turn out so bad in the industries that are already making lay-offs. Ansy Westwood, a spokesperson for the Industrial Society, an organisation that campaigns for a better working life, explains: "Our modern economy is very fluid. Companies that are jettisoning some people from some jobs will still be hiring other people for other jobs."

So, what sorts of jobs will escape the axe? And, far from being made redundant, what sort of people will be seen as

indispensable?

Nothing can be guaranteed, say the experts. David Ray, a principal consultant with the online recruitment agency Gojobsite.co.uk, adds: "With the world situation as it is, none of us can really be sure what will happen."

But common sense dictates that no matter what develops, our society will still have basic needs and essential functions. It is the jobs that serve them that are likely to be the most protected from a recession.

For this reason those in food retailing and transport are relatively secure. "Everyone has to eat and people will still have to move around," says Ray. "The same goes for pharmaceuticals. Diseases are not going to disappear; medicine will still be required."

Jobs in energy, water and gas also seem safe. "We are not going to use our utilities any less," adds Ray.

Within these sectors, people in customer-facing jobs may find they are particularly well protected from redundancy.

"These people will tend to be more highly valued than others," says McMillan. "They are the ones responsible for generating income." For a better chance of holding on to a job, he says a person must have good communication skills, be very persuasive with the public and be able to help deliver what a company needs most at a time like this – sales.

Demand for some jobs could actually rise in a recession. Richard Pearson, of the Institute for Employment studies, points to a possible boom in personal and corporate security and defence. Sadly, debt recovery could become a growth area. The public sector is perhaps the most recession-proof and it is responsible for 20 per cent of the UK labour market.

"It is the most resilient," says Pearson. As the private sector contracts the public sector

Would your job survive recession?



COMFORTABLE CONDITION: The caring professions are among those who may escape the worst effects of an economic slump

usually expands. In its last budget Labour promised to spend millions on recruiting more professionals for hospitals, schools and police. In the lead-up to 2006 there are plans to hire an extra 9,000 police officers, 10,000 teachers, 20,000 nurses and 6,500 therapists. Even without such ambitious plans there was already a real shortage of people with the skills necessary to do these jobs.

Anybody thinking of suddenly changing careers is advised to be careful. "Don't rush in to a new profession just because you think it's going to be hot in the future," says Jane Barrett, a career coach with London-based consultancy Work Maze. "It may take you up to a couple of years to retrain and you may find that the great demand you expected to be there has disappeared."

Instead of rushing in, she

recommends first doing an audit on yourself.

"Identify your skills, values and interests and play to these," she advises. "By all means take into account what the market is doing but don't base any sort of move on that alone."

If you are job hunting in a cool economic climate, there are techniques that can improve your chances of success. Colin Jackson, a director with the national outplacement specialist HAD, offers these tips:

- Avoid being too sector-specific. Recognise that your skill may be transferable and not just limited to one area of the economy.
- Be flexible, not just about your own abilities, but also in your willingness to take on different types of jobs.
- Network. Make sure everyone you know, including family and friends, is aware you are looking for a new job or a career change.
- Use the Internet to research any company you are seeking to join. In a recession you cannot afford to look like you are not completely committed to a prospective employer.

So, even if we survive whatever it is we are about to go through, our jobs will still be open to new influences. Arguably, this is the virtue as well as the vice of being inextricably linked to a modern, global economy.

Do you live in the right region?

Where you live can determine your job opportunities, particularly in a recession. The two areas most confident of employing more people in the lead up to December are the North-east and the West, according to the Quarterly Survey Of Employment Prospects from the recruitment agency Manpower. The three areas least confident are the North-west, Scotland and London. These findings are based on a questionnaire of 2,000 board directors located in different parts of the country.