
Best of the Best Business Websites (Free Resources)

The 2011 Selection

Business Reference and Services Section Education Committee

**Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS)
Education Committee** contributing members:
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In 1998, the Education Committee of the Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (ALA) began to identify several long-term educational projects that would be established to fulfill the committee's role of providing educational and developmental opportunities for librarians involved in business reference services. The "Best of the Best" Business Websites (Free Resources) project was completed in 2000. The Committee subsequently has published the Selected Core Resources pages. This year our pages migrated to LibGuide format and can be accessed at www.brass.libguides.com.

The RUSA BRASS Education committee selected three Best of the Best Business Websites from an ongoing list of more than 250 websites on various disciplines. Due to the economic conditions our nation is facing, the committee decided to recognize websites that provide critical information on employment and housing.

HOUSING

Best of the Best Winner: The National Association of Home Builders (www.nahb.org)

Whether you are a home buyer, a home builder, or a researcher interested in housing policies and the economic impact of the home building industry, this website has something for you. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) is a trade organization for the home building industry that works to advance affordable housing policies. It serves its 160,000 members by delivering technical expertise, business support, continuing education, and networking opportunities. NAHB also offers information to the public on building, buying, remodeling, and owning a home.

This wealth of information is readily accessible through the NAHB website. While some content is for members only and requires a subscription, the website is a treasure trove of free reports, statistics, directories, and news on housing and the home building industry. The well-organized interface presents content in tabs for Housing Topics, Housing Policy, and Housing Data, in addition to the more member-oriented Tools, Community, and Education and Events tabs.

The website also features a Newsroom (www.nahb.org/page.aspx/landing/sectionID=3), which includes information on building materials data and reports, construction statistics, economic forecasts, mortgage financing markets, home design and consumer preferences, home sale prices, economic impact information, several housing indexes, and state and

local data. Other areas of discussion on the NAHB website include design, land development, standards and safety in the workforce, careers and jobs, and mortgage financing and affordability. The NAHB website also informs its members and the public about congressional decisions that will have an impact on the housing market, as demonstrated by its campaign against mortgage interest deduction.

The website also provides users many useful tools related to this industry. A home buyer may find an affordable house price calculator and locate certified builders, remodelers, and related providers in several directories. Low-cost e-learning events are available to both members and non-members. The free biweekly e-newsletter "Eye on the Economy" and the Eye on Housing blog deliver the latest in research and policy analysis. For those who need additional data and reports, a link to the fee-based HousingEconomics.com is accessible through the Housing Data page.

The NAHB Housing Data FAQ page (www.nahb.org/generic.aspx?sectionID=137&genericContentID=142545) proves very useful in navigating the U.S. Census Bureau website for housing data and in answering "business librarian trivia" types of questions (for example, how to find current prices of lumber, what kinds of building materials are used in the construction of new homes, or how many establishments build homes in the United States). It also provides a list of relevant government agencies and private organizations, including Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies. One drawback is that the FAQ page may or may not appear on a dynamically generated list of related documents when you click on different data sub-topics. Adding a permanent link to FAQs on the Help page would be useful.

The affiliated NAHB Research Center (www.nahbrc.org) develops, tests, and evaluates new materials, equipment, business methods and standards. The Research Center also conducts economic and consumer trends research and forecasting and studies important policy issues such as land use, affordable and sustainable housing, special needs housing, green building for environmentally sensitive construction and land development. Drawing on data from multiple government agencies including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, as well as trade associations such as the National Association of Realtors and the Mortgage Bankers Association, the NAHB Research Center also conducts primary research and analysis of economic and consumer trends in housing. Another affiliate, the Home Builders Institute (www.hbi.org) is charged with workforce development, administering educational and job training programs.

The NAHB website is successful in meeting the needs of different segments of its audience and is recommended for real estate and construction science academic programs or any users seeking information on housing, home building, or remodeling.—*Natasha Arguello, Business Research Librarian, University of Texas at San Antonio*

EMPLOYMENT

Best of the Best Winner: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov)

Whenever news breaks of unemployment figures rising, the cost of living increasing, or the percentage of recent college graduates finding full time employment, the source of information is more than likely the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). As an independent federal agency within the Department of Labor, the BLS abides by its stated purpose to provide accurate, timely, relevant, and objective data and statistics on labor market activity, working conditions, and price changes in the U.S. economy. The audience is public policy makers, economists, business owners, academia, and consumers.

The agency's website is robust, indicative of the many data sets, surveys, analyses, reports, and publications contained within. The homepage covers a lot of information and users must scroll far down to see it all, but the site's design is uncluttered and intuitive. Popular resources on this first page include a map of all of the states that can be manipulated to get local statistics, the latest numbers for the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the Unemployment Rate with an RSS link available to offer constant updates, and links to the latest issues of the popular government publications, such as the *Monthly Labor Review* and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.

At the top of the page there are six major tabs: Home, Subject Areas, Databases and Tools, Publications, Economic Releases, and Beta. Hover over the Home tab and users will see broad subject categories such as Inflation and Prices, which offers a link to the popular Consumer Price Index, as well as sections on Employment, Unemployment, Productivity, and Workplace Injuries. Contained within these headers are related surveys and reports organized by national and local data. Due to the breadth of each section, it is especially helpful how the website authors organize information for various audiences with headers displaying resources for Business Leaders, Consumers, Economists, Investors, Jobseekers, and more. The At a Glance feature offers a quick look at popular tables on national, state, and local economic conditions.

The Databases and Tools section offers calculators for historical economic or regional comparisons and allows users to manipulate the data to make customized tables, charts, and graphs. This section even includes access to the BLS FTP site for collecting large sets of information. Users can target and organize relevant data, which is especially helpful for sharing reports and adding to presentations. Most all of the website content is in the public domain, and users would just need to cite the source as the BLS.

The Publications section contains "The Editors Desk," or TED, which resembles a blog report with charts. It is produced every business day and has a link to archives. It also has a catalog to publications and periodicals and includes the popular "Spotlight on Statistics," which offers in-depth discussions on a subject, such as "Women at Work," as well as attractive images, charts, and graphs. One drawback is that

the authors offer various access points to the same publications, which can be frustrating to the reader, and bookmarking is advised.

The Economic Releases Section provides the latest reports of the BLS as well as full calendars announcing the dates the user can expect the reports to be released. Regional reports are included along with comparison charts of international manufacturing measures. While it appears the agency does not have RSS feed availability for most of the site's content, there is a free e-mail service that allows users to sign up for information delivery.

The Beta section offers a peak of the new website features, which indicates the site's desire for continuous improvement.

While much of the BLS content is reproduced on proprietary databases, the agency's website has much to offer with its scope of information, intuitive interface, and timely economic information updates. Highly recommended. All levels/libraries.—*Michelle Allen, Business Reference Librarian, Gast Business Library, Michigan State University*

EMPLOYMENT

Best of the Best Winner: Local Employment Dynamics, U. S. Census Bureau (<http://lehd.did.census.gov/led>)

Credit the U.S. Census Bureau for devising a method to determine job creation, turnover rates, new hire wages, and other information from administrative records maintained by U.S. federal and state agencies at the county and sub-county levels. The dataset is called the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), while the program that publishes these data are the Local Employment Dynamics (LED) program. The LED creatively integrates existing data from state-supplied administrative records on workers and employers with existing censuses, surveys, and other administrative records, producing improved labor market information via hybrid products. Its three main tools are Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI) Online, Industry Focus, and OnTheMap.

QWI Online provides eight workforce indicators, from average monthly earnings to job creation and job separation. Indicators are searchable by age group, gender, industry code (NAICS at the two- to four-digit levels), ownership, or geography (county, metropolitan area, or workforce investment area). With QWI Online, it is easy for researchers to determine how many people ages 25 to 34 were working in construction jobs in Fresno County, California, in the second quarter of 2010 or whether the county gained or lost jobs in that sector and age group during that quarter.

Industry Focus determines the top industries by area and local employee group on a quarterly basis. It profiles a specific industry, ranks it among the top industries, and then

examines the characteristics of employees in that industry.

OnTheMap shows where workers reside and work through an interactive mapping application. Workforce-related maps, profiles, and underlying data can show travel patterns from park and ride areas to final destinations or identify policy strategies to connect residents with their workplaces through mass transit. The data are updated annually.

Selective other LED products include: Net Job Gains and Losses/Net Job Growth Rates, which utilizes QWI Online data to show job gains and losses by industry within each state; OnTheMap for Emergency Assessment, which computes the potential impact on workers and jobs when tropical storms reach the U.S. continent using real-time; and the Community Economic Development (CED) HotReport, which is aimed to meet the economic needs of local business leaders.

Initiated in 2001, early state adopters of the LED, such as Indiana, can now see their job dynamics not only in terms of the net difference in the total number of jobs from one period to another, but in terms of actual new hires, new positions, separations, and the resulting turnover rate. To date, 48 states have LED partnership involvement, with a planned projection involving all U.S. states and territories.

There are eLearning tutorial modules for QWI Online, Industry Focus, OntheMap, and the complete LED site. Each module provides a relevant scenario with animation and voice-over in a 10 to 15 minute segment. Additionally, the Notes tab allows a full-text reading for each screen. One drawback is that full feature viewing requires the user to download Flash.

Noted concerns for the LED data are few. Exclusions to the LED employment coverage include federal government workers, agricultural workers, domestic workers, and the self-employed. Of the workers counted, it is said that the identities of individuals and businesses are protected against disclosure in accord with strict state and federal requirements. Finally, there may be a lag time in processing data for LED products: For the Quarterly Workforce Indicators, final 2009 third-quarter data and preliminary 2009 fourth-quarter data were processed in the 2010 third-quarter.

The fast-paced demand for detailed and timely labor market data has increased in recent years. State and local officials, in particular, need strong, local-level data to make informed decisions regarding the employment situation, economic development, and industry positioning. The LED program demonstrates how a convenient partnership between the U.S. Census and participating states has created powerful and mutually convenient relational data tools to fill this critical need. These products will be especially beneficial to governments at all levels, private sector planners, and students and faculty at middle school through university levels.—*Monica Hagan, Business Reference and Instruction Librarian, University of California, Los Angeles*