

## Why it pays better to be a cowboy than a doctor

By John Crudele, September 1, 2011

An old tune cautions, “Mamas, don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys

Don’t let ’em pick up guitars and drive them old trucks

Make ’em be doctors and lawyers and such.”

With all due respect to Willie Nelson and his parenting skills, is the advice in this song still sound?

Tomorrow we’ll get another monthly employment report, and it is likely to be dismal. The experts are expecting growth of just 90,000 jobs in August, down from 117,000 in July.

Neither of those numbers is impressive.

There will be a nice little bump in August from the government’s pile of make-believe jobs -- better known as the birth/death model.

But even with the jobs the [Labor Department](#) thinks but can’t prove are being created by newly born companies (hence “birth” in the model), the headline figure tomorrow isn’t likely to make anyone shoot his pistol into the sky.

This report will make ’em -- the mamas, that is -- wish they hadn’t sprung for all those years of schoolin’ and instead had let their babies -- as they’d say on “Wagon Train” -- just get a dang job.

Today I have a treat for you: a list of confidential earnings figures from small businesses your kid could have gone into -- maybe even owned -- if you hadn’t insisted they become doctors and lawyers and such. These aren’t salary figures; they are earnings for private companies with annual sales of less than \$1 million.

I never knew numbers like these existed, but here they are.

Sageworks Inc., which pries this earnings data out of business owners, says cattle ranchers and farmers (the closest we can get to “cowboys”) earn a 3.13 percent profit after all expenses on their spreads.

That’s mighty good for just cowpoking and spreading their seed around -- in an agricultural sort of way, that is.

(Warning: I’m going to use so much Western lingo in this column that even [Roy Rogers](#) would be proud, so get ready to upchuck into a campfire.)

Doctors and lawyers, of course, lasso a lot of money. The average take for family doctors, for instance, is \$141,000 and plastic surgeons --modern-day sawbones -- top \$200,000.

Lawyers’ salaries vary widely depending on where they find their personal injury cases. Median annual wages were \$110,000 a couple of years ago, the last figures I could find.

The catch, of course, is that these professionals have to find jobs before they can earn that much. And right now doctoring and lawyering are lower than a pimple on a tick on a bullfrog’s belly.

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) says that while there has been growth in the number of doctors' offices in this country over the past year (about 40,000 more), the earnings of doctors are being hurt by the recession and confusion over health-care reform.

Things are so bad my doctor is trying to get me to join the Pill of the Month club. (Just joshin' ya, pardner.)

And there are about 52,000 fewer law offices in this country now than at the peak in 2007. (See, some good has come out of the recession.)

So what are the top 10 most profitable businesses your babies could get into?

Sageworks says "depository credit intermediation" businesses -- small money lenders -- have a 9.59 percent profit margin. Technical and trade schools come in second at 9.04 percent (people need to change careers); dentists' offices are third at 8.37 percent (nobody wants to go on a job interview with crooked teeth) and accounting practices are fourth at 8.32 percent.

Fifth is "death-care services" (the old undertaker) at 7.44 percent; sixth, insurance brokerages at 7.01 percent; seventh, non-depository credit intermediation, which also loans money, at 6.89 percent; and, eighth, waste-management services (the under-appreciated garbage man) at 6.73 percent.

The ninth most profitable small businesses are outpatient care centers (for those who can't afford a regular doctor), with a profit of 6.62 percent. Fruit and nut farms round out the top 10 at 6.45 percent.

And their mama said they were nuts getting into that field.

Doctors' offices? A profit of 6.73 percent.

Law offices? A profit of 7.92 percent.

But remember, while doctors' and lawyers' offices may be profitable on a day-to-day cash-flow basis, not included in the costs are the education expenses that come before you can open one of those offices.

Even at a 3.13 percent profit, cowboys would still seem to win.

I'll finish with the figures that will infuriate you. Sageworks says that gasoline stations earn only 1.4 percent in profits despite the fact that they seemed to be rustling most of our paychecks lately. And grocery stores earn just 1.63 percent -- and now I know why cashiers check the bottom of my cart so carefully.

So, with apologies to Willie: Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be grocers. Make 'em be dentists, gravediggers and such.

For the full story featuring [Sageworks](#)' private company data, please visit The New York Post -- [Why it pays better to be a cowboy than a doctor](#).