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**Headline: 'A difficult time to be building a home' as supply strains, rising prices persist**

WATCH NOW: 'It's a difficult time to be building a home': Construction market faces supply strains, rising prices, but demand is still holding on

Subhead: Builders: Clients should expect project delays as industries try to recover

Reporter: By JOHN REID BLACKWELL

Richmond Times-Dispatch

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The impact on the construction industry from the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to linger for some time.

For commercial projects as well as people looking to build or remodel homes, builders in the region say that means two major things: Expect higher costs and delays.

Faced with supply shortages and rising prices for materials like lumber - which has soared in the past year - some builders are simply delaying projects for months, in hopes that the supply chain will catch up and costs will decline.

The Monument Cos., a Richmond-based real estate developer, has faced delays on a 260-unit apartment complex development in Spotsylvania County because "we were not even going to be able to get the bath tubs," said Tom Dickey, a partner in the company with Christopher Johnson.

"Pretty much everything across the board has gone up" in price, Dickey said. "We are definitely seeing the impact."

A similar apartment project the company was planning in Norfolk has been put on hold because of costs and supply chain issues.

"We had originally planned to start work this fall, but we have decided to postpone it until the second quarter of 2022," Dickey said of that Norfolk project. "The prices have gone up so much, but we hope it will start to return to normal."

Dickey said it is difficult to say at this point whether the higher costs for construction will translate to higher rental costs for apartments.

"What it will do is lead to decreased future supply," he said. "So if you have less product on the market, it will lead to higher rents as population continues to grow and you need more housing."

The Monument Cos. isn't the only developer and builder facing supply issues and delays.

KBS Inc., a major building construction management company in the Richmond region, also has seen some projects put on hold, said Will Paulette, a project manager for the company who oversees multiple retail, residential and historic renovation projects.

"We have had projects that developers have put on hold because of price increases," Paulette said. "That has been one of our biggest challenges. Developers will put together a pro-forma - a document of the feasibility of the project. Now, they are looking at them, and the pricing has gone up 10 or 15 percent. The numbers just don't make sense now, and they are hoping commodity prices will go down in the next couple of months."

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Home builders are pulling back on the number of projects simply to control costs until building material prices come down, said Danna Markland, CEO of the Home Building Association of Richmond.

"It is a difficult time to be building a home," Markland said. "Locally, builders are managing volume by decreasing sales, by design."

Gross sales in the Richmond region declined about 11% from April to May and then declined 20% from May to June, according to the association's research, based on survey of about 20 builders, including most of the 10 largest builders in the region.

"That is evidence of the industry putting itself into a self-induced coma," Markland said.

From June 2020 to June 2021, gross home sales in the region decreased by 41% and net sales declined by 44%.

The number of canceled projects increased from April to May by about 15%, but cancellations declined from May to June and were down about 18% year-over-year in June.

Some builders have been letting contracts go where costs have priced the buyers out of a home, Markland said.

"Cancellations have decreased, but almost every builder is - by design - decreasing sales or capping sales," Markland said. "We also have builders who have hit the pause button on sales almost entirely these past two months."

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Lumber prices have had an enormous impact on costs over the last year, though prices have been declining recently.

Much of the attention in the construction business has been focused on sizable increases in lumber prices because the COVID-19 pandemic forced the temporary closing of lumber mills.

Lumber prices have been on a roller coaster ride. Prices have varied depending on the type of lumber, but certain kinds of plywood used in construction jumped as much as 400% in cost. Since May, prices have declined on lumber futures markets.

The National Association of Home Builders reported in May that prices for one industry benchmark for lumber - the Random Lengths Framing Lumber Composite Index - had more than quadrupled since April 2020 to more than $1,500 per thousand board feet, adding nearly $36,000 to the price of a new home.

The recent decline in lumber prices is good news for builders and home remodelers such as Steven Roberts, owner of Virginia Tradition Builders LLC, though it could take some time for lumber futures prices to impact the end market. His company does large-scale home additions along with remodeling of bathrooms and kitchens.

"Lumber prices went way, way up last year and then dropped back down to within 30 percent of where they were at a baseline cost last year, then they spiked back up in May, and now have come back down over the last 45 days or so," Roberts said.

"We don't see that at the lumber yard for typically six to eight weeks," Roberts said. "There is a lag between the futures prices you see on the markets compared to what we buy from lumber yard."

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The pandemic shut down factories, interrupted shipping and stymied supply chains last year and early this year for many essential products in construction, from lumber to steel to PVC pipes.

At the same time, demand has remained strong for new construction in both housing and commercial work.

As a result, "the prices just skyrocketed for materials in plumbing, framing, lumber," said Kenneth Jones, owner of Prestige Construction, a contractor that does both residential and commercial work. The company's current projects include a new commercial building just off Midlothian Turnpike.

"Even metal studs have increased some in price," Jones said.

"It affects everyone," Jones said, adding that he has not seen a market quite like this in his 30 years in the business. "The demand is still there, though."

The pandemic also disrupted supplies for appliances and electrical wiring materials using copper.

"The majority of electrical wiring inside any building is copper," KBS' Paulette said.

"Water heaters and certain light fixtures have been difficult to fulfill," Paulette said. "Lead times are long. We have seen the cost of concrete go up recently. We are really seeing it across the board on almost all elements of a building."

A bigger headache has been "all sorts of supply chain hiccups with plumbing and tile, and cabinetry and hardwood flooring," said Roberts with Virginia Tradition Builders.

"Flexibility and timing is key," he said. "For clients who do sign up for projects, we try to set the expectation of having flexibility because something they may need along the way is going to be delayed or unexpectedly discontinued. Having flexibility and being open to making a second decision is important. It is kind of the new normal right now."

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The pandemic isn't the only factor in the cost increases, said Hunter Lansing, CEO of Henrico County-based Lansing Building Products.

Winter storms hit Texas earlier this year and shut down the power grid, resulting in disruptions for some major suppliers of construction products based in that state. That included makers of key ingredients in the PVC pipes that are used in most plumbing and drainage systems, Lansing said.

Paulette with KBS said the cost of PVC has gone up about 300%.

Lansing Building Products supplies windows, doors, gutters and siding to about 60,000 customers, mostly building contractors and professional home renovators around the country.

The cost of windows is up 7% to 10%, while vinyl siding and asphalt roofing has gone up 10% to 15%, Lansing said.

"Basically, what happened is in the middle of March of 2020, they shut down a lot of these manufacturing facilities," Lansing said. "Nearly all of our manufacturers [suppliers] came pretty close to a grinding halt because there was so much uncertainty because of this pandemic."

"It is really hard to shut down a manufacturing facility and then bring it back to full capacity," he said.

"On top of that, there were shopping challenges" at ports, Lansing said. "A lot of these huge cargo ships have not been able to get unloaded at the rate they normally would because there are not enough people working there to unload it."

Like many other suppliers and builders, Lansing Building Products has been put on allocation with manufacturers of some supplies, meaning that the amount of supplies the company can get is based on availability rather than need.

"I think we could [still] be on allocation towards the end of the year," Lansing said. "I keep trying to listen as closely as I can to when demand starts to ease off. As long as people are willing to pay double-digit price increases for materials, I think it could continue towards the end of the year."

His advice to consumers looking to do home renovations: "Plan to wait for materials, and then plan to wait for your remodelers to show up. Our backlog is months and months, and your average builder, contractor and remodeler is also backed up for months."

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Some builders are including price escalation clauses in their contracts.

Debbie Stoddard, a co-owner and vice president of Finer Homes Inc., a single-family home builder based in Chesterfield, said the company started doing that last fall.

"We did put a clause in our contracts to be able to escalate [the price]." she said. "At the same time, the buyer could walk if they want to. They could walk away and we wouldn't give them a hard time."

Some buyers have decided to wait as much as nine months to a year to start a project, but overall the demand has remained strong, she said. "I think it is because buyers can back out," she said. "It is comfort to them and so they say 'Let's go ahead and give it a try.'"

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**Headline: Pandemic accelerates demand for drivers**

WATCH NOW: Truck drivers are in high demand; Companies struggle to attract a new generation of drivers

Subhead: Companies seeking to attract and train additional truckers

Reporter: By JOHN REID BLACKWELL

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Charles City County-based trucking company Atlantic Bulk Carrier Corp. delivers products and materials that help keep America's infrastructure and economy functioning.

The 50-year-old company's drivers move a fleet of about 200 tanker trucks around the Southeast, carrying products such as water-treatment chemicals for food factories and municipalities, construction materials, and plastics for manufacturing plants, among other goods.

Truck drivers are the company's essential heartbeat, but drivers are much harder to find these days, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has kept people out of the workforce while also driving up demand for many essential goods such as groceries and construction supplies.

Company Vice President J. Ward Best said he could easily add another 20 truck drivers to the company's roster right now, which includes about 60 who are based at the Charles City location and about 100 others working from locations in six other states.

Best, like other trucking company managers, said commercial drivers have been in high demand for years, but the job market has become especially competitive over the last year.

"I have not seen hiring conditions like this in the 25 years I have been with Atlantic Bulk," Best said.

"We have probably doubled spending on recruiting this year - and seen a smaller return on that spending," he said. "There are more companies looking for drivers and fewer candidates looking for jobs."

"We're all fishing in the same ocean with more boats on the water and fewer fish in the sea," he said.

Ward said the company also has increased drivers' pay by about 10% this year to reward and keep the drivers it already has on staff and to attract more drivers.

Other companies echo what Best said.

Alan Jones, president of Abilene Motor Express, a trucking company based in Chesterfield County that is part of Knight-Swift Transportation Holdings Inc., the largest full truckload carrier in North America, said he could hire about 100 drivers now to add to his 434 drivers. Abilene has a fleet of 478 tractor trucks.

The company's drivers transport products ranging from foods to refrigeration equipment to distribution centers across the country.

"If you were to go around to every company in Richmond and tally up the total, there are about 2,000 truck driver positions [that are open] within 50 to 75 miles of Richmond," Jones said. "It is general knowledge in the industry."

The tight labor market is pushing companies to increase wages and sign-on bonuses for drivers, while also spending more on recruitment. Those increased costs work their way through the supply chain to the end customer for shipped goods.

"The real issue that this is creating is the cost of goods have increased dramatically," Jones said. "The lack of capacity in transportation has forced freight rates up. Everything gets passed to the consumer."

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The driver shortage has been compounded by a number of factors, including an aging workforce and new federal requirements for electronic time records that limit how long drivers can be on the road, according to Jones, Best and other professionals within the industry.

"We have got a lot of older drivers that are retiring and leaving the industry," said Dale Bennett, president and CEO of the Virginia Trucking Association, a trade group. "We just don't have the pool of younger workers coming into the industry to replace them."

The pandemic accelerated that trend, Bennett said. "Driver schools had to shut down, so you did not have people training" for the required commercial driver's license, or CDL, he said.

Another factor, Jones said, is that fewer drivers now are willing to do so-called "over-the-road" driving, which involves long-distance trips that can often take drivers away from home for weeks. That's why Abilene and other companies are shifting more toward offering regional and short-haul jobs in which drivers can be back at home most days.

According to data collected by American Trucking Associations, a national coalition of trade groups, the trucking industry currently needs an additional 60,800 truck drivers nationwide.

By including anticipated driver retirement numbers over the next 10 years combined with the expected growth in demand for trucking, the U.S. trucking industry will need to hire roughly 1.1 million new drivers over the next decade, or an average of nearly 110,000 per year.

The median pay for tractor-trailer drivers in the Richmond area is more than $54,000, but drivers can earn a lot more than that, depending on experience and the routes they travel.

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Some manufacturing companies also are pushing hard to find truck drivers.

Prince George County-based Service Center Metals has 14 drivers in its own fleet, but the company supplements that with contract truckers to ship its products around the country and to Canada.

"I really need to be at 20 or 21 drivers, and I just can't get there - I can't get people in the door," said James Larson, shipping manager for Service Center Metals, which makes aluminum extrusion products that are sold to customers in construction and manufacturing.

Larson said the company can ship products more cheaply with its own drivers, at a cost of around 5 cents per pound, but costs have risen substantially over the last year to about 10 cents per pound when it uses outside carriers.

ADUSA Distribution LLC, the distribution company of supermarket retailer Ahold Delhaize USA, has been looking for truck drivers to serve its Prince George distribution facility that ships products to Food Lion grocery stores in the region.

The company held a job fair in late August looking for about 100 warehouse workers and about 30 truck drivers. That job fair was successful at hiring new employees, but as of Sept. 1, the company still was looking for eight drivers, said Darnell Brown, the facility's transportation manager.

"I would say it is an incredibly competitive job market at this point," said Brown, a former owner of an independent trucking business.

"I have been in transportation for a while, so the shortage is nothing new to the industry. It has been going on for while. The pandemic has had some impact on it."

Brown said he foresees demand continuing to grow over the next few years. "It is a growing business," he said. "Stores are always opening. There is always a need."

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Truck driving requires a CDL issued by the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, which takes 160 hours of training to earn, including 40 hours in the classroom and 120 hours of hands-on training.

Virginia has a number of private businesses that offer training programs, which can cost anywhere from about $3,000 to $8,000, according to industry sources.

Virginia's Community College system also offers CDL courses at campuses statewide. For instance, in the Richmond area, truck driver training is offered through the Community College Workforce Alliance, a workforce training partnership between John Tyler Community College, which will be renamed Brightpoint Community College, and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College.

The Community College Workforce Alliance and three other community colleges in Virginia contract with CDS Tractor Trailer Training, a private provider based in Woodford, to operate the classes.

The typical cost of truck driver training programs at community colleges is $4,500, but through the system's "Fast Forward" program, which is designed to offer credentials in various skilled trades and professions, students who complete the CDL program can get two-thirds of that cost covered, while other grants are available to cover the remaining cost.

"The application for Fast Forward is very easy," said Elizabeth Creamer, vice president for workforce development and credential attainment for the workforce alliance. "It is not like you are applying for a scholarship. The General Assembly looked at this as an economic development strategy. Their interest was getting more truck drivers on the road."

On-the-road training was interrupted for about two months in 2020, though online classroom training continued.

"We have companies that hire our students straight out of training with their CDL," said Natalie Meredith, assistant vice president for workforce development for the Community College Workforce Alliance.

Students can enroll in weekday or weekend CDL classes. Before starting road training, they meet daily with instructors to learn driving skills on 48- and 53-foot tractor-trailer trucks in a parking-lot range at John Tyler 's Chester campus.

A total of 567 students were enrolled in the Community College Workforce Alliance CDL program in the fiscal year that ended June 30. The number who have subsequently obtained a commercial driver's license is not yet available.

Enrollment in the most recent fiscal year was up from the previous 12 months that ended June 30, 2020, which was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. That fiscal year, a total of 430 students participated in the program, with 370 completing it and 301 earning a CDL.

The fiscal year before that, 449 students participated in the program, with 402 completing the program and 358 earning a CDL.

Statewide, in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2,234 students enrolled in truck driver training programs at community colleges, and so far 1,202 have earned credentials, a number that is expected to increase.

In the previous fiscal year, which was impacted by the pandemic, 1,844 students enrolled in programs and 1,250 earned credentials.

"I think every college will tell you they have the demand and would like to expand" their truck-driver programs, said Randall Stamper, assistant vice chancellor for grants and workforce programs for the community college system.

"The big sticking points are that it is very real-estate intensive. You have to have a driving range, and it has to be dedicated for that purpose. You need to have two driving routes approved that include highway and turning requirements."

The expense of buying and maintaining trucks is also a factor for some colleges in being able to expand training programs as well as availability of instructors, he said.

Among the roughly 20 students training on the range at John Tyler last week was Kia Johnson, a Petersburg resident who is scheduled to complete her training on Friday.

Johnson said she drives her car a lot anyway while helping with her husband's renovation contracting business. "This is a career change for me," said Johnson, 31, who also has worked in restaurants and in a warehouse. "I never drove a truck before until I came here."

Johnson said the cost of her classes was covered by the Fast Forward program and other grants. "I am telling everybody about this program," Johnson said, adding that her cousin is now enrolled, too.

"There is a lot of opportunity" in truck driving, said Johnson, who has already secured a job with a trucking company and plans to do long-distance trucking. "There is a lot of money you can make out there."

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Some companies offer their own internal CDL training programs.

For instance, Abilene Motor Express has been approved as a third-party tester for the DMV and is able to provide training to new hires and issue a CDL to them.

"We do all of that in-house, so the individual never even has to set foot in the DMV," said Kimberley Lacy, vice president of safety and compliance at Abilene. "It is very advantageous for us, and it is a streamlined process for the new hire that is going to be a [truck driving] trainee."

"We offer this training program not only at no charge to the trainee, but they are paid while they are training," Lacy said. Pay for truck drivers at Abilene can earn $62,000 a year just out of training, not including bonuses, though some drivers can make as much as $120,000.

Truck mechanics, too, are hard to find.

Abliene has offered sign-on bonuses for mechanics, but even that has not produced as many prospects as needed. "It's a dying breed," said Joe Egan Jr., vice president of maintenance for Abilene. He said the company is working on developing a mechanics apprentice program.

Estes Express Lines, a national trucking company based in Richmond, set up its own internal training program for drivers more than 10 years ago.

The company has hired about 1,550 drivers through the first eight months of this year, pushing its total number of drivers to nearly 10,000 nationwide, said Webb Estes, the company's vice president.

"Right now, I could use another 1,000 drivers across the country," Estes said.

The company's training schools at regional sites across the country, including one in High Point, N.C., that serves the Southeast, can each train hundreds of drivers per year, but enrollment was hampered by the pandemic last year, Estes said.

"The demand is still very high," Estes said. "We have had to rely on outside parties to help us move some of the extra freight. We are kind of having to do whatever it takes to move the freight right now."

At Atlantic Bulk Carrier, Best said he would love to get more drivers like Dominique Merritt, a Petersburg resident and a tractor-trailer truck driver for four years who previously did deliveries for a uniform company for 12 years.

Merritt said she got her CDL from the John Tyler truck-driver training program.

"I really wanted to get out there and drive big trucks," said Merritt, 35, who now does treks like a nearly 11-hour drive to Georgia last week, followed by a required 10-hour break before the return trip.

"You get to see places you probably would never see on your own, for one," she said. "It is a change of scenery, and I don't like to stay still."

"There aren't enough women out here who are doing this," Merritt added. "The men have been running this territory for a really long time, and it is time for more women to come in and show how it is really done."

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**Headline: Job outlook has improved for new college graduates**

WATCH NOW: Job outlook for new college graduates has improved, but perseverance is required

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University of Virginia senior Gabby Forward searched for several months, but she was finally able to get a job in her preferred career path this spring despite all the economic disruptions and other challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

"I applied to a lot of different jobs," Forward said. "Most of them never got back to me, and some of them said that they could not accept my application because they had already found someone or I was not qualified enough."

Forward, a media studies major from Harrisonburg, will start work soon as an analyst for a New York company managing social media platforms for pharmaceutical brands.

"I wanted specifically to do something in health care, so the job is perfect," she said.

The job market for the college Class of 2021 is looking better than it did for last year's graduates, who searched for work during the height of the pandemic.

One key survey of hiring plans conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers in March showed the employers expect to hire about 7.2% more new college graduates from the Class of 2021 than they hired from last year's graduates.

That's a sharp increase from fall 2020, when employers expected to reduce college hiring slightly, the organization reported. In contrast, the job market for graduates in 2019 was the strongest the organization had ever seen.

During the pandemic, "employers have been cautious when it comes to committing to hiring," said Ed Koc, director of research for the National Association of Colleges and Employers. "Back in August and September [2020], when we did our first job survey, we were looking at flat or a little bit of a decline. Things improved after January" as COVID-19 vaccines rolled out.

Now, employers are "looking optimistic" about recruiting new college grads especially into the 2022 class, he said. "The market is looking up for college students, but it will take a bit to recover from what we encountered last year."

Graduates are still facing some hurdles in landing their preferred job or even furthering their education. Among those are the challenges that social distancing have imposed, along with a rapid shift to online interactions and impersonal technology.

At a time when an increasing number of job applications are submitted and sifted online, Forward said she was able to land her job the old-fashioned way - through networking and a referral by someone she knows at the company that hired her.

"I think that is probably the main reason I got the job, because I was not applying through [online] platforms," she said.

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An internship proved to be the pathway to full-time work for Lucinda K. Conteh, a Virginia State University senior and business management major who will be starting remotely in July as a business analyst for a bank. VSU's graduation is May 23.

"It is something where you have to start early, and it is a long process," Conteh said of the path new grads like her have taken to getting their preferred job.

A New Jersey native, Conteh said she started by applying for an internship more than a year ago. "I did not get the position at first, but then a position opened up and they called me and asked me if I was still interested."

The internship last year helped her get the experience and connections that ultimately led to the job offer.

"I'm definitely grateful. It's not something that is happening for everyone in the world now," she said.

Sadie Pruett, a senior at Washington and Lee University who is from Wytheville, has found herself in the job hunt this spring after her initial plans to apply for and attend law school starting this fall got stymied by a series of technological glitches.

Twice last year - once in June and once in October - Pruett tried to take the key standardized test for law school admissions, the LSAT.

Because of the pandemic, she had to take it online rather than in person. Both times, the test crashed for her midway through, and her results could not be saved.

The next makeup date for her would be in January.

"That would mean my law school applications would not go out until February," she said. "It is one reason why I switched from going to grad school" to looking for a job.

It means Pruett also entered the job hunt later than most seniors. Now, she is looking to take a "gap year" or two in her education to get work experience, and she is putting a positive spin on that.

"I certainly think I could use a break from school," said Pruett, an American politics and philosophy major. "I definitely do want to work. Last summer, I was not able to do that because of the pandemic, and that is something I have been doing since I was 16."

Koc, the analyst from the National Association of Colleges and Employers, said companies surveyed by the organization expect to adopt a "hybrid" model between working remotely and working in person.

"I think businesses are still trying to work out exactly what the future is going to be on that," he said.

Forward, who is graduating from UVA on Saturday, will start her new job working remotely, but she plans to move as soon as she can to work in person.

"They offered the option to work remotely [indefinitely], but I declined it because I felt like it would be sort of alienating to start my first job remotely," she said.

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Career services professionals at local universities say there has been an overall warming in the job market from the near-freeze seen last year at this time.

Most say they will be collecting data for several months to come on just how many of the Class of 2021 get jobs this year.

"We are seeing this huge influx of both internships and full-time jobs being posted since really March and April," said Katybeth Lee, director of business career services at Virginia Commonwealth University. "I think a lot of it has to do with the vaccines being much more readily available. Companies who were holding off are now looking to staff up."

In fact, Lee said, the number of job openings for new grads is now outrunning the number of students applying.

"A lot of students are under the impression that the landscape is bleak, when in fact there are opportunities out there," she said.

Jobs in the hospitality and tourism sector remain sparse because that industry has struggled so much, but such fields as accounting and marketing are seeing an uptick, Lee said.

"The biggest complaint we have had is on the employer side - that they can't find the applicants they want," she said.

One specialty within the business school - supply chain management and logistics - is practically guaranteed to get a graduate a job right now, she said.

"It is one of the majors that has a huge need, and the pandemic has underscored that even more," Lee said.

Joseph Lyons, executive director for student engagement and career services at VSU, said he has seen a rebound in job offers this year, particularly in science, technology and engineering fields and in customer service-related jobs.

This year, students have had to apply more time and skills making professional connections through various channels, Lyons said.

"Things are looking up, but we are still helping our students try to adapt and be competitive, in terms in trying to market themselves," he said.

"I think one of the things [students] often do is apply for positions online, but the opportunity to know someone who knows someone is of more value," Lyons said.

"One thing that is important as we talk to recruiters, is now employers are looking for work ethic, critical thinking skills, team building skills and communications skills," he said. "Really, employers are looking for students capitalizing on those skills regardless of your major. They are transferable skills."

Job opportunities are looking pretty strong in such fields as information technology, cybersecurity and education, said Dontrese Brown, executive director of Randolph-Macon College's Edge Career Center, which has been working to prepare students for the new virtual world of job searching by doing mock online interviews.

One thing employers will notice about the Class of 2021 is resiliency, given what students have overcome during more than a year of a pandemic, Brown said.

"What these employers are going to get are some really, really tested students that are coming into the workforce and can deal with difficult situations, make decisions quickly on their feet and be able to adjust," he said.

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The pandemic's disruption to college life took its toll on many students, and some are just looking to take a break and find a job to tide them over while they consider career options, said Jeremiah Brooks, senior class president at VSU.

"School was tough this year," said Brooks, who is from Springfield. "I know a couple of students who are taking a break, and they might have a business or a job on the side. They are taking a break from what school was this year and just taking care of themselves."

Others are looking to further their education.

"I know some that are going to graduate school," said Brooks, adding that includes him. He said he is entering grad school at George Mason University with the goal of eventually earning a doctorate in public policy and founding his own firm to advance consumer protection policies and fight discriminatory practices.

David DeMarco is hoping a background in media, politics and data science will help provide him the transferable skills for a job.

DeMarco finished his course requirements a year early at the College of William & Mary and then worked last year as a campaign manager for a state representative near his home in Pennsylvania. He also designed a computer algorithm to help automate data analysis for smaller campaigns, and he has worked on a podcast.

Now back in the job market, DeMarco, a government major with a minor in data science, is planning to attend graduation with the rest of his class on Saturday and is considering his options. He wants to work in multimedia journalism.

"A lot of people are getting great jobs, but I do know people that are struggling and are taking other jobs that are not necessarily related to what they want to do," DeMarco said. "A lot of people are considering just going to grad school - people who were not considering it before. There is more stability in continuing education right now, versus going out and trying to find an opportunity that might be a needle in a haystack."

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