
Geoscientists

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Significant Points

- Work at remote field sites is common.
- Federal, State, and local governments employ 24 percent of all geoscientists.
- A master's degree is usually the minimum educational requirement; a Ph.D. degree is required for most high-level research and college teaching positions.
- Although employment of geoscientists is expected to grow more slowly than average, good job opportunities are expected in most areas of geoscience.

Nature of the Work

Geoscientists study the composition, structure, and other physical aspects of the Earth. With the use of sophisticated instruments and by analyzing the composition of the earth and water, geoscientists study the Earth's geologic past and present. Many geoscientists are involved in searching for adequate supplies of natural resources such as groundwater, metals, and petroleum, while others work closely with environmental and other scientists in preserving and cleaning up the environment.

Geoscientists usually study, and are subsequently classified into, one of several closely related fields of geoscience. *Geologists* study the composition, processes, and history of the Earth. They try to find out how rocks were formed and what has happened to them since their formation. They also study the evolution of life by analyzing plant and animal fossils. *Geophysicists* use the principles of physics, mathematics, and chemistry to study not only the Earth's surface, but also its internal composition; ground and surface waters; atmosphere; oceans; and magnetic, electrical, and gravitational forces.

Oceanographers use their knowledge of geology and geophysics, in addition to biology and chemistry, to study the world's oceans and coastal waters. They study the motion and circulation of the ocean waters; the physical and chemical properties of the oceans; and how these properties affect coastal areas, climate, and weather. Oceanographers are further broken down according to their areas of expertise. For example, *physical oceanographers* study the tides, waves, currents, temperatures, density, and salinity of the ocean. They examine the interaction of various forms of energy, such as light, radar, sound, heat, and wind, with the sea, in addition to investigating the relationship between the sea, weather, and climate. *Chemical oceanographers* study the distribution of chemical compounds and chemical interactions that occur in the ocean and on the sea floor. They may investigate how pollution affects the chemistry of the ocean. *Geological and geophysical oceanographers* study the topographic features and the physical makeup of the ocean floor. Their knowledge can help companies find oil and gas off coastal waters. (*Biological oceanographers*, often called marine biologists, study the distribution and migration patterns of the many diverse forms of sea life in the ocean, but because they are considered biological scientists, they are not covered in this statement on geoscientists. See the statement on biological scientists elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Geoscientists can spend a large part of their time in the field, identifying and examining rocks, studying information collected by remote sensing instruments in satellites, conducting geological surveys, constructing field maps, and using instruments to measure

the Earth's gravity and magnetic field. For example, they often perform seismic studies, which involve bouncing energy waves off buried layers of rock, to search for oil and gas or to understand the structure of the subsurface layers. Seismic signals generated by an earthquake are used to determine the earthquake's location and intensity. In laboratories, geologists and geophysicists examine the chemical and physical properties of specimens. They study fossil remains of animal and plant life or experiment with the flow of water and oil through rocks.

Numerous specialties that further differentiate the type of work geoscientists do fall under the two major disciplines of geology and geophysics. For example, *petroleum geologists* map the subsurface of the ocean or land as they explore the terrain for oil and gas deposits. They use sophisticated geophysical instrumentation and computers to interpret geological information. *Engineering geologists* apply geologic principles to the fields of civil and environmental engineering, offering advice on major construction projects and assisting in environmental remediation and natural hazard-reduction projects. *Mineralogists* analyze and classify minerals and precious stones according to their composition and structure. They study the environment surrounding rocks in order to find new mineral resources. *Sedimentologists* study the nature, origin, distribution, and alteration of sediments, such as sand, silt, and mud. These sediments may contain oil, gas, coal, and many other mineral deposits. Paleontologists study fossils found in geological formations to trace the evolution of plant and animal life and the geologic history of the Earth. *Stratigraphers* examine the formation and layering of rocks to understand the environment in which they were formed. *Volcanologists* investigate volcanoes and volcanic phenomena to try to predict the potential for future eruptions and hazards to human health and welfare. *Glacial geologists* study the physical properties and movement of glaciers and ice sheets. *Geochemists* study the nature and distribution of chemical elements in groundwater and earth materials.

Geophysicists specialize in areas such as geodesy, seismology, and magnetic geophysics. *Geodesists* study the Earth's size, shape, gravitational field, tides, polar motion, and rotation. *Seismologists* interpret data from seismographs and other geophysical instruments to detect earthquakes and locate earthquake-related faults. *Geomagnetists* measure the Earth's magnetic field and use measurements taken over the past few centuries to devise theoretical models that explain the Earth's origin. *Paleomagnetists* interpret fossil magnetization in rocks and sediments from the continents and oceans to record the spreading of the sea floor, the wandering of the continents, and the many reversals of polarity that the Earth's magnetic field has undergone through time. Other geophysicists study atmospheric sciences and space physics. (See the statement on atmospheric scientists, and physicists and astronomers, elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Working Conditions

Some geoscientists spend the majority of their time in an office, but many others divide their time between fieldwork and office or laboratory work. Work at remote field sites is common. Many geoscientists, such as volcanologists, often take field trips that involve physical activity. Geoscientists in the field may work in warm or cold climates and in all kinds of weather. In their research, they may dig or chip with a hammer, scoop with a net, and carry equipment in a backpack. Oceanographers may spend considerable time at sea on academic research ships. Fieldwork often requires working long hours. Geologists frequently travel to remote field sites by helicopter or four-wheel-drive vehicles and cover large areas on foot. An increasing number of exploration geologists and geophysicists work in foreign countries, sometimes in remote areas

and under difficult conditions. Travel often is required to meet with prospective clients or investors.

Geoscientists in research positions with the Federal Government or in colleges and universities frequently are required to design programs and write grant proposals in order to continue their data collection and research. Geoscientists in consulting jobs face similar pressures to market their skills and write proposals so that they will have steady work.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

A bachelor's degree is adequate for a few entry-level positions, but most geoscientists need at least a master's degree in general geology or earth science. A master's degree also is the minimum educational requirement for most entry-level research positions in private industry, Federal agencies, and State geological surveys. A Ph.D. degree is necessary for most high-level research and college teaching positions.

Many colleges and universities offer a bachelor's or higher degree in a geoscience. In 2005, more than 100 universities offered accredited bachelor's degree programs in geoscience, about 80 universities had master's degree programs, and about 60 offered doctoral degree programs.

Traditional geoscience courses emphasizing classical geologic methods and topics (such as mineralogy, petrology, paleontology, stratigraphy, and structural geology) are important for all geoscientists. Persons studying physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, engineering, or computer science may also qualify for some geoscience positions if their course work includes study in geology or natural sciences.

Computer skills are essential for prospective geoscientists; students who have experience with computer modeling, data analysis and integration, digital mapping, remote sensing, and geographic information systems will be the most prepared entering the job market. A knowledge of the Global Information System (GIS) and Global Positioning System (GPS)—a locator system that uses satellites—has also become essential. Some employers seek applicants with field experience, so a summer internship may be beneficial to prospective geoscientists.

Geoscientists must have excellent interpersonal skills, because they usually work as part of a team with other geoscientists and with environmental scientists, engineers, and technicians. Strong oral and written communication skills also are important, because writing technical reports and research proposals, as well as communicating research results to others, are important aspects of the work. Because many jobs require foreign travel, knowledge of a second language is becoming an important attribute to employers. Geoscientists must be inquisitive, be able to think logically, and be capable of complex analytical thinking, including spatial visualization and the ability to develop comprehensive conclusions often from sparse data. Those involved in fieldwork must have physical stamina.

Geoscientists often begin their careers in field exploration or as research assistants or technicians in laboratories or offices. They are given more difficult assignments as they gain experience. Eventually, they may be promoted to project leader, program manager, or some other management or research position.

Employment

Geoscientists held about 28,000 jobs in 2004. Many more individuals held geoscience faculty positions in colleges and universities, but they are classified as college and university faculty. (See the statement on teachers—postsecondary elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

About 25 percent of geoscientists were employed in architectural, engineering, and related services, and 20 percent worked for oil and gas extraction companies. In 2004, State agencies such as State

geological surveys and State departments of conservation employed about 3,600 geoscientists. Another 2,900 worked for the Federal Government, including geologists, geophysicists, and oceanographers, mostly within the U.S. Department of the Interior for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and within the U.S. Department of Defense. About 5 percent of geoscientists were self-employed, most as consultants to industry or government.

Job Outlook

Although employment growth will vary by occupational specialty, overall employment of geoscientists is expected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations through 2014. However, due to the relatively low number of qualified geoscience graduates and the large number of expected retirements, opportunities are expected to be good in most areas of geoscience.

Graduates with a master's degree may have the best opportunities. Those with a Ph.D. who wish to become college and university faculty or to do advanced research may face competition. There are few openings for graduates with only a bachelor's degree in geoscience, but these graduates may find excellent opportunities as high school science teachers. They also can become science technicians, or enter a wide variety of related occupations.

Few opportunities for geoscientists are expected in Federal and State Government, mostly because of budgetary constraints at key agencies, such as the USGS, and the trend among gov-



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ernments toward contracting out to consulting firms. However, departures of geoscientists who retire or leave the Government for other reasons will result in some job openings over the next decade. A small number of new jobs will result from the need for oceanographers to conduct research for the military or for Federal agencies such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) on issues related to maintaining healthy and productive oceans.

Many geoscientists work in the exploration and production of oil and gas. Historically, employment of petroleum geologists, geophysicists, and some other geoscientists has been cyclical and affected considerably by the price of oil and gas. When prices were low, oil and gas producers curtailed exploration activities and laid off geologists. When prices were higher, companies had the funds and incentive to renew exploration efforts and hire geoscientists in larger numbers. In recent years, a growing worldwide demand for oil and gas and for new exploration and recovery techniques—particularly in deep water and previously inaccessible sites in Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico—has returned some stability to the petroleum industry. Growth in this area, though, will be limited due to increasing efficiencies in finding oil and gas. Geoscientists who speak a foreign language and who are willing to work abroad should enjoy the best opportunities, as the need for energy, construction materials, and a broad range of geoscience expertise grows in developing nations.

Job growth is expected within management, scientific, and technical consulting services. Demand will be spurred by a continuing emphasis on the need for energy, environmental protection, responsible land management, and water-related issues. Management, scientific, and technical consulting services have increased their hiring of many geoscientists in recent years due to increased government contracting, and also in response to demand for professionals to provide technical assistance and management plans to corporations. Moreover, many of these workers will be needed to monitor the quality of the environment, including aquatic ecosystems, issues related to water conservation, deteriorating coastal environments, and rising sea levels—all of which will stimulate employment growth of geoscientists.

An expected increase in highway building and other infrastructure projects will be a source of jobs for engineering geologists.

During periods of economic recession, geoscientists may be laid off. Especially vulnerable to layoffs are those in consulting and, to a lesser extent, workers in Government. Employment for those working in the production of oil and gas, however, will largely be dictated by the cyclical nature of the energy sector and changes in government policy.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of geoscientists were \$68,730 in May 2004. The middle 50 percent earned between \$49,260 and \$98,380; the lowest 10 percent earned less than \$37,700, the highest 10 percent more than \$130,750.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, beginning salary offers in July 2005 for graduates with bachelor's degrees in geology and related sciences averaged \$39,365 a year.

In 2005, the Federal Government's average salary for managerial, supervisory, and nonsupervisory positions was \$83,178 for geologists, \$94,836 for geophysicists, and \$87,007 for oceanographers.

The petroleum, mineral, and mining industries are vulnerable to recessions and to changes in oil and gas prices, among other factors, and usually release workers when exploration and drilling slow

down. Consequently, they offer higher salaries, but less job security, than other industries.

Related Occupations

Many geoscientists work in the petroleum and natural-gas industry, an industry that also employs numerous other workers whose jobs deal with the scientific and technical aspects of the exploration and extraction of petroleum and natural gas. Among these other workers are engineering technicians, science technicians, petroleum engineers, surveyors, cartographers, photogrammetrists, and surveying technicians. Also, some physicists, chemists, atmospheric scientists, biological scientists, and environmental scientists—as well as mathematicians, computer systems analysts, database administrators, and computer scientists—perform related work both in the exploration and extraction of petroleum and natural gas and in activities having to do with the environment.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on training and career opportunities for geologists is available from either of the following organizations:

- ▶ American Geological Institute, 4220 King St., Alexandria, VA 22302-1502. Internet: <http://www.agiweb.org>
- ▶ American Association of Petroleum Geologists, P.O. Box 979, Tulsa, OK 74101. Internet: <http://www.aapg.org>

Information on oceanography and related fields is available from:

- ▶ Marine Technology Society, 5565 Sterrett Place, Suite 108, Columbia, MD 21004. Internet: <http://www.mtsociety.org>

Information on obtaining a position as a geologist, geophysicist, or oceanographer with the Federal Government is available from the Office of Personnel Management through USAJOBS, the Federal Government's official employment information system. This resource for locating and applying for job opportunities can be accessed through the Internet at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> or through an interactive voice response telephone system at (703) 724-1850 or TDD (978) 461-8404. These numbers are not tollfree, and charges may result.