Both / And

Why Multiple Data Sources Lead To Better Labor Market Decisions

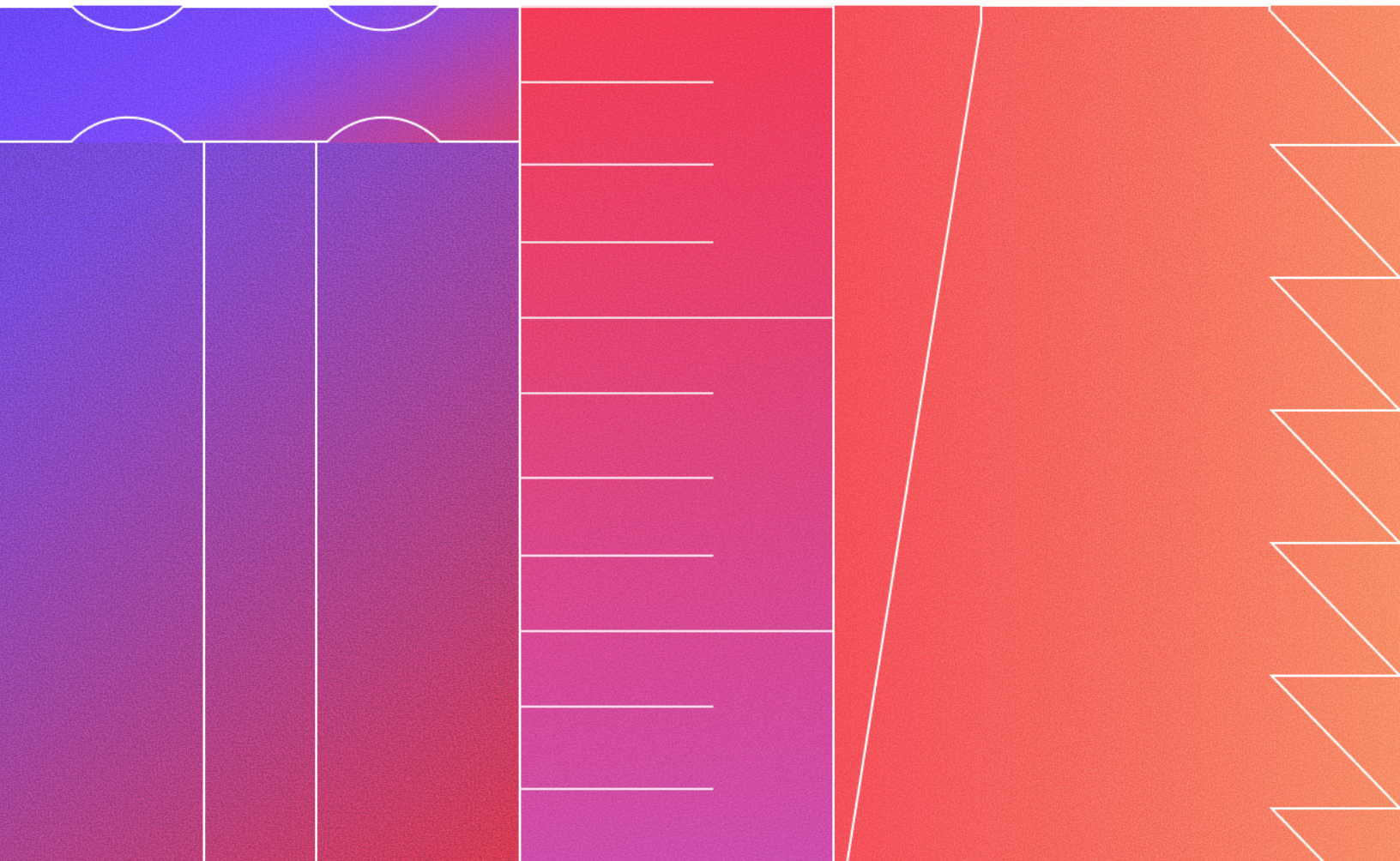
Lightcast

When you're fixing something around the house, you choose your tools based on the tasks you need to accomplish. You use a hammer to drive nails, not screws. A measuring tape measures length, not weight. You wouldn't use a saw for either one of those tasks, and that's not because a saw is a bad tool, but because it's suited for a different purpose.

Just as no single tool fixes every problem, no single dataset can answer every question about jobs, people, and the labor market. That's not a flaw to be eliminated; it's a reality to be managed.

Ultimately, the goal you want to pursue will determine which data you want to use. The key is to understand each dataset's strengths and limits, and to combine them intelligently. The question you need to ask is not "Which tool is best?" but "Which tool meets my current needs?"

When you're building something, you don't wonder if the hammer is objectively better than the tape measure or the saw—you use all three.



The Available Tools: LMI, Postings, and Profiles

GOVERNMENT STATISTICS (LMI)

Sources like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' establishment and household surveys, U.S. Census Bureau demographic and economic data, and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis's national accounts provide the official map of the economy. At Lightcast, we refer to this as "labor market insight," or LMI.

The strengths here are foundational: carefully designed survey methods, large enough to represent the economy as a whole, and supported by decades of historical data. They reach into corners the internet often misses—agriculture, public administration, certain manufacturing segments—ensuring no sector is left invisible. But the cadence is slow: many reports are issued annually at most. Initial releases may trail conditions by months, and are often revised as better information arrives. Government statistics are the most solid ground we have, but not the most agile.

JOB POSTINGS

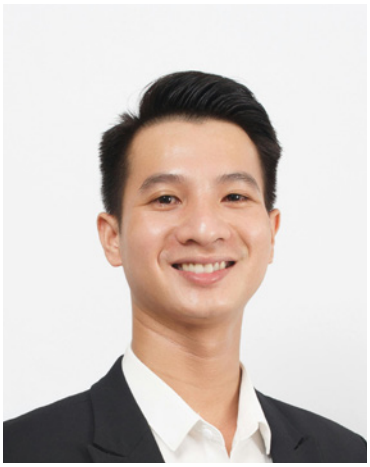
Where government statistics provide the history books, job postings are the newsfeed. These datasets capture employer demand as it appears in the market: specific roles, locations, and skill requirements. Their granularity is unmatched—down to the exact programming language requested, or the shift pattern offered at a given facility.

The value here is speed and detail. This data can be used to detect emerging skills, shifting hiring geographies, or sudden changes in industry demand within days, sometimes hours. The volume of postings also allows for high-resolution analysis across niche roles or microregions that official statistics gloss over.

However, job postings also have their limits. Certain industries, like construction or small-scale manufacturing, post rarely. Skills can be implied but not listed, leaving gaps between the work done and the words used to describe it.

Lightcast job postings provide an extremely rich dataset: we have collected over 3 billion postings from over 215,000 current and historical sources. The methodology used to obtain job advertisements from publicly available online job boards and company websites is based on Lightcast's advanced scraping technology, then de-duplicated and refined to ensure clarity and accuracy.





PROFILES

Profiles data—drawn from online resumes, portfolios, and career histories—offers a person-centered view of the labor market. It illuminates career trajectories, educational pathways, skill portfolios, and mobility patterns. Unlike job postings, which show demand and intent for a role, profiles show the realized supply of talent: who is in the labor force, where they've been, contact information, and the skills they possess. For professional and technical occupations in particular, profiles data provides a depth of skill-level insight no other source can match. It's indispensable for workforce planning, talent acquisition, and understanding long-term occupational shifts.

Yet profiles data is shaped by the digital visibility of its subjects. Workers in trades, service industries, and less-online sectors often leave no digital footprint. It is self-reported, which means titles, dates, and skills may be incomplete or inconsistent. And because it only is a snapshot of workers who are visible online, profiles data cannot represent the full labor market, and neither can it track historic trends or project future trajectories.

Furthermore, profiles can also be subjective: when describing their own work online, people tend to use generic or managerial terminology that may not reflect their actual title. Likewise, a worker might list their location as "San Francisco" when in reality they work remotely from Santa Rosa four days a week—or maybe they moved last year and haven't gotten around to changing their city online yet.

Lightcast has the most granular and comprehensive collection of profiles on the market—and all profiles are GDPR and CCPA-compliant to protect individual privacy. Our dataset includes over 1.2 billion professional contact information with details including skills, work experience, seniority, and industry.

The Employment Situation and BLS

The best-known piece of economic data in the U.S. is probably the monthly Employment Situation report released by BLS. (This is also called the jobs report, and it's the release that generates headlines like "The US added x many jobs this month.") It also offers a useful lesson in choosing the right tool for the job.

The Employment Situation is designed to gauge the real-time pulse of America's labor market dynamics. That's an important goal, and a valuable signal about the overall health of the US economy and labor market. It moves very quickly, given that scope—and that means the data often has to be revised in later releases. The revisions are the price we pay for speed. They're a feature, not a bug.

When the Employment Situation report released August 2025 saw historically large revisions, it wasn't a sign that something had gone terribly wrong; instead, it was an example of one dataset catching up to the rest. Lightcast Senior Economist **Ron Hetrick wrote**:

> "BLS is the most respected labor data producer in the world and it isn't even close... border crossing data, the stagnant unemployment claims, and our Lightcast job postings data all confirm what we are seeing in the BLS data. It is important that everyone learn to triangulate data. Confirm what you see across all data channels and judge for yourself."

The US statistical services, including the Census, BLS, and Bureau of Economic Activity, manage to produce some of the most robust data available globally, while providing privacy to individuals and businesses. Their survey-oriented methodology manages to efficiently capture an accurate view of the labor market by communicating with just a sliver of the population.

Over the coming years, government LMI will become even more important as a workforce signal, not less: policy shifts and demographic changes will disproportionately affect parts of the workforce that are least represented in postings and profiles: skilled trades, blue-collar work, and certain service sectors. Immigration policies, tariffs, and retirements in aging occupations will reshape labor supply in ways best measured through government surveys.

For these segments, official statistics remain indispensable. They may lack the speed of postings data, but they provide coverage that private datasets cannot match.

But two things can be true at once: the jobs number from BLS might be very good as an indicator of economic health, despite its cadence of revisions, while at the same time it does not provide information useful for decision making around strategic planning.

Lightcast does not rely on preliminary jobs numbers to produce our workforce data. The early figures simply don't match the level of precision our clients require. Instead, we draw on later, more detailed government releases, supplemented by our own postings and profiles data, to provide the granularity and reliability needed for their workforce decisions. **The best screwdriver in the world won't help you hammer in a nail.**

The Lightcast Approach

Instead, Lightcast LMI includes 16 other sources in the U.S. that we collect and refine to provide the best-possible understanding of the labor market, so that when customers need to make a decision, they have all the information they need.

The combined outputs of government statistical agencies cannot be derived or inferred from any other available set of information, which is why they are uniquely valuable in strategic workforce planning. Postings and profiles are also uniquely valuable, but in ways that are very distinct from the way that official statistics are.

Lightcast maintains and develops all three sources, and benchmarks them against each other, because each fills gaps the others leave open.

One example of this integrated approach is the Lightcast Occupation Taxonomy (LOT), our proprietary classification of over 1,900 occupations. LOT exists because postings, profiles, and government surveys all describe work differently, often in inconsistent or incomplete ways. By synthesizing them, we can identify roles that are the same across employers, industries, and geographies, regardless of job title. That harmonization allows for truly global, comparable, and actionable insight. It's why a business in Calgary, a government agency in Colorado, and a university in Cambridge can all analyze the same occupation structure and be confident they're talking about the same work. In practice, this is what "Both/And" looks like: data streams combined to reveal a clearer, more usable map of the labor market.

Government statistics provide authority and coverage; postings deliver immediacy and detail; profiles reveal human pathways. Taken alone, each tool has blind spots. Taken together, they make the labor market legible, measurable, and navigable.

Both/And, not Either/Or

When looking at different possible sources of data about the labor market, it is tempting to pit those sources of data against each other in an absolute sense. "Are job postings better than government LMI?" "Are social profiles a better representation of the economy than postings?" This approach neglects the purpose of the data—what decision are you trying to make?

If you are attempting to figure out who might be competing with you for labor in a market, job postings are the obvious answer. If you are attempting to figure out the education level, prevailing wages, and likelihood of retirement for blue collar workers, government-based insights are the clear winner. If you are attempting to understand whether the attrition rates you see at your own company are unusual compared to your competitors, you'll want profiles.

Arguing about the 'best' type of data also ignores the fact that the three sources are ultimately complementary. None of these are substitutes for each other, because they serve different functions: profiles can't tell you about lost manufacturing jobs in Ohio, just like LMI can't tell you the skills that manufacturing workers in Cincinnati have.

The most effective approach is to let each element of data play to its own strengths, while mitigating the weaknesses of the others.

TRIANGULATION IN PRACTICE: LOCATION PLANNING

When a company is evaluating whether to enter or expand in a market, no single dataset is enough. The right approach is triangulation—using each source for the questions it answers best.

- **Government Statistics** establish the baseline. What is the unemployment rate, and does it point to a tight labor market or a pool of available workers? What are the median household incomes, the age distribution of the workforce, and the prevailing wage levels? These measures set the context: the economic climate, the demographics, and the structural conditions of the market.
- **Job Postings Data** reveal current dynamics. What wages are employers advertising for the positions you plan to hire? Is hiring activity rising or falling relative to the national trend, and relative to this market's own history? Which companies are competing for the same talent? Postings surface the real-time behavior of employers, showing competitive pressure and emerging opportunities.
- **Profiles Data** illuminate the supply side. What is the depth of white-collar or technical talent in this region? How often do workers with those skills change jobs? What career pathways and educational pipelines feed into the roles you need? Profiles help quantify the availability and mobility of the kinds of people you'll rely on to grow.

Taken together, these perspectives move the decision from guesswork to evidence. Government statistics frame the environment. Job postings signal demand. Profiles map supply. Only in combination do they provide the confidence needed to make market-entry decisions.

NOTHING IS PERFECT; EVERYTHING IS VALUABLE

One of the fundamental realities for statistics on the labor market is that they are always fundamentally imperfect, whether that is caused by sample bias, misclassification, poor weighting, or some other part of collecting, processing, or presenting the data. Instead of looking for flawless data, you should instead seek out data that is accurate enough to inform the decision you need to make.

Some questions of accuracy can be solved with better data. The NAICS (North American Industry Classification System) and SOC (Standard Occupation System) both rely on six layers of granularity for increasingly specific jobs—knowing how many people in a region work in Accommodation and Food Services (NAICS 72) is one thing; knowing how many work in Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels (NAICS 721110) is another.

If you're trying to understand which manufacturing occupations are growing, "Manufacturing" at the 2-digit level is useless. You need to know whether it's precision machining, plastics, or food production — because the training and investment decisions are different.

- **Granularity matters:** Data grouped at the 2-digit NAICS or SOC level can be informative for high-level policy analysis, but it's rarely sufficient for operational decisions in a business or regional planning context. Workforce programs need to understand, for instance, not just "manufacturing" as a whole, but which sub-sectors are growing or declining, and what skills are shifting within them.
- **Timeliness matters:** If your decision needs to be made in the next week, you can't rely heavily on a dataset that's revised every quarter.
- **Bias matters:** Profiles data might overrepresent software engineers in urban centers, while underrepresenting agricultural laborers in rural areas. Recognizing this bias allows you to adjust or supplement your inputs.

The labor market is too complex for any single dataset—public or private—to capture in full. The most effective strategy is to combine the best available sources, understand their limits, and match them to the decision at hand.

Both government statistics and private data have roles to play. Job postings, profiles, and official surveys are not rivals; they are collaborators. By using all the tools at their disposal, organizations can navigate uncertainty with greater confidence, detect changes sooner, and act with the best information available. That's the Both/And mindset: not choosing between tools, but choosing the right combination to get the job done.


Lightcast