

Virginia Hiring Trends Shed Light on Where Female Workers Found Work In the Midst of the Pandemic



After the release of latest BLS jobs report for March 2022, CNBC published [an analysis](#) with the headline “More than 200,000 women joined the labor force in March: ‘We’re heading in the right direction.’” That’s great news but it leads to the question of which industries have provided the most opportunities for female workers as Virginia navigated the pandemic.

To answer this question, focusing on hiring activity may be useful because looking at just the change in payroll employment may not give a full picture of which industries in the economy were actually doing the most hiring during the reopening period in 2021. Virginia hiring trends during the first quarter of 2021 suggest that the economic recovery continued but industry labor markets were challenged by the cross-currents of long-term demographic and technological change. With the workforce disruption from the pandemic quickening these trends, which industries were the largest sources of jobs?

According to the Census Bureau, there were approximately 370,000 hires in the Commonwealth during the first quarter of 2021, an increase of 27,000 from the same period in 2020. **Female workers comprised 80% of this hiring growth** by adding 22,000 of those workers. However, this was 6,000 fewer hires than five years earlier. Over five years, female hires rose by 4,000 while male hires fell by 10,000. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on industries with high concentrations of female workers like accommodation and food service is a reason for this disparity. Also, many female workers returned to work last year after temporarily leaving the labor force during the height of the pandemic in 2020 to look after their children who were remote learning or for other reasons.

These hiring trends suggest that **women have made inroads into many industries that have had, historically, majority male workers and that trend accelerated in some industries coming out of the worst of the pandemic.** For example, Virginia specialty trade contractors hired around 400 more female workers during the first quarter of 2021 over the year, while hiring around 400 fewer male workers.

Similarly, the **retail sector** also has always relied on female workers, but some types, like home and garden centers and car dealers, have traditionally been seen by many as male dominated. However, hiring trends in early 2021 showed that both industries actually increased female hiring while cutting male hiring when compared to the same period in 2020.

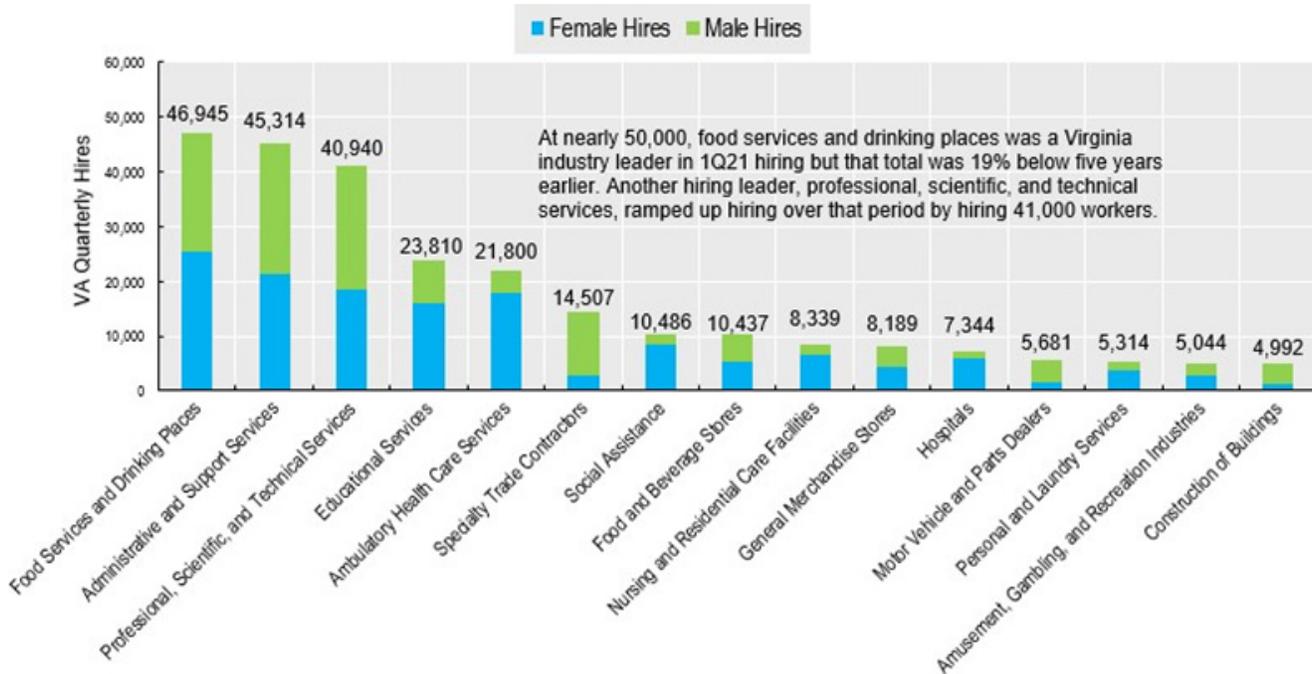
While the pandemic greatly affected the retail sector, its impacts varied greatly, depending on what kinds of goods were being sold. General merchandise stores, food and beverage stores, and building material and garden equipment centers are among the largest retail employers in Virginia and, combined, hired nearly 25,000 workers during the first quarter of 2021. All three grew hiring compared to the same period in 2017 but only general merchandise stores maintained the elevated hiring seen in 2020, when foot traffic at these establishments grew rapidly as people spent more time in their homes, with reduced travel and dining out at restaurants. Other retailers benefiting from the ‘at-home’ trend included furniture and home furnishing stores and sporting goods retailers, which added many more hires as retail sales broadened and grew in 2021. Two exceptions were clothing stores and gasoline stations. Clothing stores have seen sales increasingly move from customers purchasing in store to purchasing on line, along with less demand for dressy clothing and formal business attire. Weak employment trends at gasoline stations could be due to the changing preference of drivers away from gasoline-only service stations and toward establishments offering multiple goods and services in addition to gasoline, and so may be classified partially as restaurants, convenience stores, and the like.

An even larger source of jobs for female workers, **the service sector comprises over three quarters of the Virginia economy** and encompasses a wide range of business activities. The service industries accommodations and food services and drinking places have been most impacted by the pandemic. Together, they hired over 50,000 during the first quarter of 2021, which was a much smaller number than during more normal times. These businesses were among the last to fully reopen in many areas and that showed up in hiring, which lagged other parts of the economy that resumed normal operations earlier on. Hiring was down by around a quarter in food services and drinking places and by over a third in accommodations. The amusement, gambling, and recreation industry was hard hit by reduced travel and tourism in the state and it too saw hiring drop by over a quarter from first quarter of 2017. The rates of hiring drop off among females and males were similar in these industries. Hiring rates have ramped up since last year as workers have quit jobs in these industries in record numbers, leaving employers scrambling to hire their replacements.

Administrative and support services had around 45,000 hires during the first quarter of 2021. Within that total, female hires grew by 3,000 while male hires declined by 500 over the year. The number of hires were essentially unchanged over five years as female hires rose by nearly 2,000 and male hires fell by around 2,000.

The third largest service industry employer in Virginia is **professional, scientific, and technical services**, which hired 41,000 during the first quarter of 2021. This was five percent larger

Figure 1. Virginia Industries that Did the Most Hiring during the First Quarter of 2021 The top fifteen industries in quarterly hires in the Commonwealth were dominated by the service sector



Source: Census Bureau. Longitudinal-Employer Household Dynamics (LEHD) Program.

over the year and nine percent larger over five years. Within it, much of the computer, scientific and technical hiring took place in Northern Virginia, which saw building payroll job growth over the course of 2021. As a group, services provided to individuals and households like repair and maintenance, personal and laundry services, and ‘private households’ (gardeners, butlers, maids, etc. working in a household) saw weakened business conditions and hiring compared to before the pandemic.

If added together, the **education and healthcare services** industries totaled over 70,000 hires (combining private, state and local government employment) in the first quarter of 2021. Hiring demand in these industries fluctuated in the last two years but typically increased compared to 2020 and 2017. Indicating an increasingly popularity among male workers, hiring growth trends among males in healthcare industries like ambulatory health care services and hospitals outpaced female hiring as both of those industries saw male hires grow by over a third when compared to the same period in 2017. Similarly, nursing and residential care facilities also saw male hiring growth while female hiring dropped off by 13% over that five year period.

A service-sector industry impacted by the growing prevalence of e-commerce has been credit intermediation and related activities—or **retail banking**—which has seen digital processing of transactions reduce the need for brick-and-mortar bank branches. This trend accelerated during the pandemic. In Virginia, there were 3,600 hires in this industry during the first quarter of 2021, which was over ten percent lower over-the-year and 21% lower over five years.

Religious, grant making, civic, professional and similar organizations appear to have been impacted by the pandemic as hiring was around 3,500 in the first quarter of 2021. This was 20% lower than 2017 overall and nearly a quarter lower among female hires. Hiring in **justice, public order, and safety activities** declined by 17% in Virginia over the year, and by seven percent over five years. The drop off was also slightly worse among female hires.

A third sector greatly impacted by the events of the last two years has been **transportation and logistics**. A lot has been written about the nationwide trucker shortage and this may be illustrated by hiring by Virginia trucking employers, which fell slightly over the year but fell by 11% over five years. However, industries that benefited from home delivery and e-commerce trends like couriers and messengers and warehousing and storage saw large hiring increases over five years; by 336% and 56% respectively. During that period, female courier and warehousing hires grew at a faster pace than male hires. In contrast, transportation equipment manufacturing saw 400 in total quarterly hiring growth, but with all of that growth coming from male hires, which rose by thirty percent.

Virginia industry hiring information from the first quarter of 2021 is a year old and some things have changed since then, like the highly elevated levels of quitting and job openings seen in recent months. However, many trends evident last year appear to still be present today. Perhaps one of the most important of these is that the pandemic era’s rapidly evolving labor market saw hiring among female and male workers change across the economy, with female hires making inroads into many industries and male hires making inroads into others.