

Bartering Your Skills: What's Their Value?

In the aftermath of a nationwide disaster, such as a financial collapse or an EMP attack, there's a good chance that our economy will be reduced to a barter economy. Many experts have predicted this, based largely on what has happened in similar circumstances, elsewhere in the world.

These experts recommend stocking up on barter goods that you can use during such a time. I have no argument with that, as you'll need something to trade, in order to get the things you need. However, I wouldn't put barter goods before the supplies you need for your family; make sure you've got enough of those first.

But goods are not the only thing you can trade during such a time; your skills could be bartered too, if you have the right sorts of skills. While most modern professions won't be worth much; skills that can help people survive will become very marketable. The need for many of these skills will give the people who have them a definite advantage.

What Sorts of Skills?

For a barter economy to take over, we have to assume a major disaster; something that is serious enough that people aren't confident in the government's ability to back the value of the dollar. That's why I mentioned the financial collapse and [EMP attack above](#).

Most disasters, such as natural disasters, martial law or civil war, won't create a situation where a barter economy is needed. People will still use cash for their transactions, as long as they have cash to use. They will only resort to barter when they are out of cash.

That paints us a pretty ugly picture, one in which much of what we depend on to survive is lost. But that's the ideal situation for those of us who are prepared and who have taken the time to learn the necessary skills to survive. We can take care of the opportunity to trade our skills for what others may have that we can use.

So, what sorts of skills will be useful for bartering in that time?

- General survival skills – If power is down, something as simple as starting a fire or purifying will be a valuable skill as many won't know how to do those things.
- Medical skills – Medical skills of all kinds will be in high demand, as normal medical services will be overrun. Sickness and accidents will increase, making these skills highly valuable.
- Midwifery – Midwives will take over from medical doctors for most childbirths. The difficulty of getting to a doctor will make this necessary.
- Gardening – Yes, something as simple as gardening will be valuable, as there won't be enough food. Your vegetable garden will become very valuable. Being able to help your neighbors start their own gardens, which would mean having seeds for them to use as well, could be the key skill to build a neighborhood survival team, with you as the leader.
- Animal husbandry – For the very same reason that gardening will be valuable, being able to raise livestock to feed yourself will become valuable.
- [Any sort of repair skills](#) – With the loss of electricity or a market, products will become unavailable. People will need to keep what they have, getting it repaired if it breaks. This includes anything from repairing small appliances to vehicles and heavy machinery.
- Small engine repair – Most mechanics are somewhat

baffled when faced by small engines. But there will be a greater need to repair power tools, than cars.

- Mechanics – When the economy is in trouble, people don't replace their cars. They have them repaired and keep using them longer.
- Building trades – While there won't be as much demand for this as some of the other skills I'm mentioning, rebuilding society will require the ability to build new buildings or more likely, rebuild existing buildings to accomplish new purposes.
- [Blacksmithing](#) – In olden times, the blacksmith was the local hardware store, tool manufacturer and general repair man. As people adjust to the new lifestyle, we will see a need for those skills resurface.
- Practical engineering – From communications to pumping water, a host of infrastructure will need to be created, for those who survive. If the current communications network is destroyed by an EMP, some sort of communications will be needed for local governance and defense.
- Clergy – Many people will have a struggle with adjusting to their new lifestyle. Clergy and other counselors will be needed for those who can't make the transition on their own. Clergy will also be needed for the functions of baptisms, weddings and funerals.
- Military – With any sort of breakdown of society, there is an increase in lawlessness. Some will gather together, forming gangs to prey on others and steal the necessities of life. If you can't defend yourself or your neighborhood can't defend itself, then you'll become victims.

Obviously, the actual skills that will be in the greatest demand will depend on the exact situation you find yourself in. It is possible that some parts of the infrastructure will still be in operation. In that case, the skills to repair it won't be needed as much. But if some key part of the

infrastructure is out of commission, such as water purification or electric power, the people who can repair that will be in high demand.

How Much Are Your Skills Worth?

Determining the actual value of your skills will be challenging. It's challenging enough trying to figure out the value of goods and services in normal times; in those decidedly abnormal times, it will be much harder to calculate. There are a few key factors to take into consideration here:

- How badly is the skill needed to survive?
- How rare is the skill?
- How easy is the skill to learn?
- How valuable is whatever people are bartering for that skill?

Basically, we're talking about the law of supply and demand here. If there's a lot of clean water available, then purifying water isn't going to be all that valuable. But if the city water supply is known to be contaminated, that same water will go up extensively.

You will probably also find that the value of your skills will vary through time. Knowing how to raise a vegetable garden might be a very valuable skill at the beginning; but as you train others, the value of that skill will go down. On the other hand, building trade skills may not be considered very valuable at the beginning, but as time goes on, they may become more valuable.

How much you change will then depend on how much there is a need for what you have to offer. Some would say that you should offer your skills to the community for free, but that only works when everyone is working together for the common good. If you are part of a survival team and everyone is pitching in, doing whatever they can, that works; but it

doesn't with society at large.

Typically, the ones who will expect you to give your skills to the community for free will be those who don't have anything to offer you in return. Just like now, there are always people looking for a handout. But you have to remember that your responsibility is to take care of your family, everyone else comes after that. When you talk to these people, put it that way. Tell them that you are willing to help them, but that will take you away from taking care of your own family. Therefore, what can they offer you in return to help you out?

Since [money won't exist in any meaningful way](#), you're going to have to establish a base value for your skills. In other words, in the situation as it exists, how much is your skill worth? Some skills will be worth more than others. For example, medical skills will probably be pretty valuable in just about any situation; but by comparison, being able to start a fire won't be so valuable.

Why is that so? To answer that, we have to go back to the questions I asked at the beginning of this section. Medical skills are rarer, essential for survival and hard to learn; that makes them valuable.

Probably the easiest way to establish a value for your skills will be in comparison to some common commodities. If food is scarce, as it probably will be, then food will become the standard of comparison for all trade. You will quickly find that there will be "standard" prices established for different types of food, often comparing them to other types of food. An egg might be worth a quarter cup of rice and a can of vegetables might be worth a cup.

Set the value of your services in comparison to these common items. Always start high, so that you can bring your price down in the negotiation process. At the same time, don't make it so high that people just walk off, thinking that there is

no way they can afford your services.

Be ready with alternate pricing, if they don't have your preferred item to trade. This is one of the problems with bartering. Those that want goods and services may not have what the other person wants in trade for what they have. That's the whole reason that money exists. However, if you have several items which you are willing to accept in trade, you increase the chances of success.



Tricks to Bartering

The value of everything will shift during that time period. Today, we value gold, silver and jewels. Those may retain value, but they [won't be very easy to barter](#). That's because they won't be useful for survival. The only people who would be interested in trading for gold and silver will be people who have enough excess that they don't need to have in order to survive.

During World War II, there was an incredible shift in values. People living in the occupied countries of Europe developed a [black market bartering system](#) for foodstuffs. Those living in the city would travel out to the country to "visit friends and relatives." Rather than packing their suitcases full of clothes though, they would take silver and jewelry. This they traded to the farmers for hams, cheeses, cured meats and butter.

While you might be thinking that a silver teapot isn't worth as much as a ham, you have to realize that you're thinking from the viewpoint of someone living in normal times, where food is plentiful. But that teapot won't help you survive, while the ham will. When there is a serious food shortage, you might be willing to make that trade too.

Try to be fair as much as possible. I know that some people would say to take advantage of the situation and get as much as possible. But that doesn't mean you should. The problem with that is that you may just succeed in making an enemy. The best deals are those where both parties walk away from it feeling as if they won. A win-win is an especially big win for you.

One of the most important parts of bartering during a time of crisis is ensuring your own safety. You may very well find yourself bartering with desperate people, who are willing to steal from you. Of course, it is harder to steal a skill than a product, but they could ask you to do some work and never give you what was promised.

There's also a risk of being kidnapped for the skills you have. [The more valuable your skills are](#), the more likely that someone will make that attempt. Of course, the more valuable your skills are, the more your community will recognize their value and work to protect you as well.

Always make sure that your "deal" is worked out before you start working. That way, there won't be any surprises later. Granted, they could still refuse to pay, but at least they won't be able to claim that it's because they didn't think it would be that much. Often, if people aren't planning on paying, they will act disinterested in the negotiating process and look for an opportunity to take advantage; don't allow them that.

Speaking of taking advantage; it's never safe to make a deal alone. You should always have someone there to protect you, preferably behind the people you are talking to. That way, if things turn sour, you have someone positioned to take them out, before they can take you out.

*This article has been written by **Bill White** for [Survivopedia](#).*