

8 REASONS WHY SKILLS TRAINING IS KEY TO ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

The Empirical Case for Investments
in Workforce Development

INTRODUCTION: A MORE PROSPEROUS ECONOMY STARTS WITH SKILLS TRAINING POLICY

America's **economic prosperity** depends on a strong, skilled workforce. The industries that will power our economy through the 21st century – construction, technology, manufacturing, healthcare, clean energy, and others - rely on working people with the training to meet evolving workplace demands. But too often, workers don't have access to the skills training and supportive services they need, and businesses struggle to fill critical roles. Make no mistake – it's not because of a lack of talent. It's simply that our workforce policies and investments haven't kept up with the demands of today's economy.

Smart skills training policies can expand opportunities, close equity gaps, ensure that workers have access to in-demand training, help businesses hire skilled employees, strengthen local economies, and enable more people to participate in a thriving economy.

This brief lays out eight data-driven reasons why skills training is essential to America's prosperity. The numbers are clear: **when we invest in skills training, we invest in shared prosperity.**



1

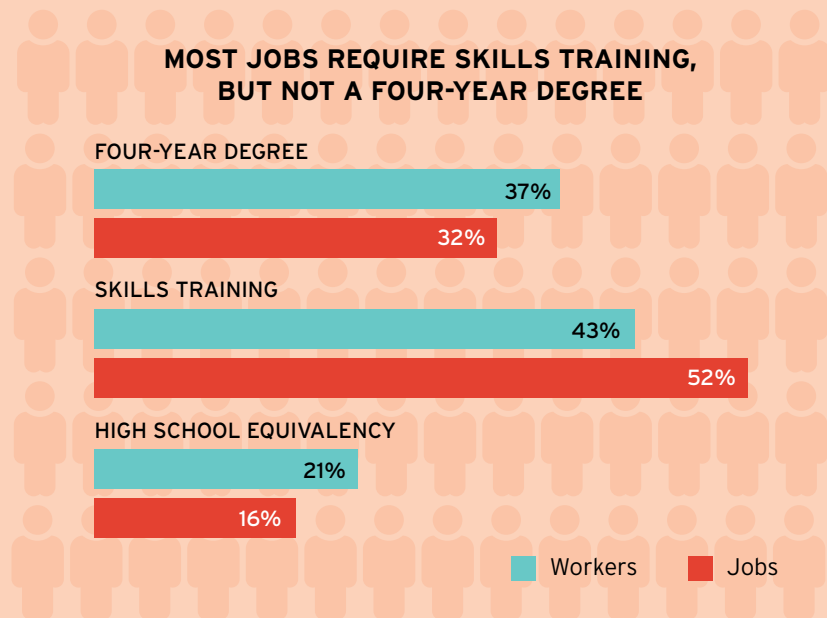
THE JOBS MISMATCH HURTS WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS

Our economy is rapidly shifting, and with it comes a notable shift in our workforce needs. Today, **more than half of all jobs (52%) require education or training beyond high school** but not a four-year degree—yet **only 43% of workers have had access** to the skills training and supportive services (like transportation, childcare, or career navigation) necessary to fill these in-demand roles.¹ Jobs that require skills training are the backbone of the American economy. Those jobs

include highly skilled, in-demand jobs in healthcare, medical technology, IT, software, trades like plumbing and electricity, and advanced manufacturing. But the lack of access to training – and the resulting jobs mismatch hurts workers, businesses, and the economy.

It's a major challenge for businesses, with **74% of hiring managers** agreeing that there is a disconnect between workforce needs and workers' skills.² The problem is broad. More than **90% of industry association economists** report that employers in their sectors struggle to find qualified workers.³

MOST JOBS REQUIRE SKILLS TRAINING, BUT NOT A FOUR-YEAR DEGREE



BOTTOM LINE: The jobs mismatch is holding back both workers and businesses—leaving people without access to good jobs and employers without the talent they need to grow. Fixing the mismatch requires greater investment in skills training and supportive services that align with real workforce needs.

2

SKILLS TRAINING UNLOCKS BETTER JOBS AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY



ERICA MOTON, AVIATION TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM, WEST LA COLLEGE

By becoming certified I can work for any airline whether it be a well-known one or a private jet company, I can even expand my horizons with amusement parks. My daughter inspired me to go back to school and continue my education. I want her to know that giving up isn't an option; there's always better out there and you can do anything you put your mind to.



UPSKILLING INCREASES WAGES
8.6%

AMERICANS THINK THAT SKILLS TRAINING IS PART OF WHAT MAKES A JOB A "GOOD JOB"

OPPORTUNITIES TO TRAIN AND ADVANCE	96%
OPPORTUNITIES TO GET PROMOTED	96%
BENEFITS LIKE HEALTH INSURANCE AND RETIREMENT	96%
HIGH PAY	94%
PAID SICK LEAVE	94%
PREDICTABLE SCHEDULING	92%
HAVING A VOICE IN DECISIONMAKING	82%

Skills training is a proven pathway to better jobs and higher wages, and working people recognize its importance. **By 2031, there will be 16.4 million good jobs offering strong wages and stability to workers with training beyond high school but that don't require a four-year degree.**⁴

The wage boost from training is real. According to Gallup, **workers who complete an upskilling program increase their wages by 8.6%.**⁵ Digital skills, in particular, offer a powerful return. Workers in jobs that require even one digital skill **can earn 23% more** than those in jobs without digital requirements, an **increase of \$8,000** per year for an individual worker.⁶ Moving from a job requiring no digital skills to one requiring at least three can **increase pay by an average of 45%.**⁷

Polling shows that people value training:

- ▶ **96% of voters**, including 93% of those who work in the service sector, agree that opportunities to train and advance skills are essential to a good job.⁸
- ▶ **63%** say they would take advantage of **digital skills**

training if it meant advancing their careers.⁹

- ▶ **67%** believe that the **lack of access to ongoing training is a serious problem** for U.S. workers – a challenge rooted in underinvestment in skills training.

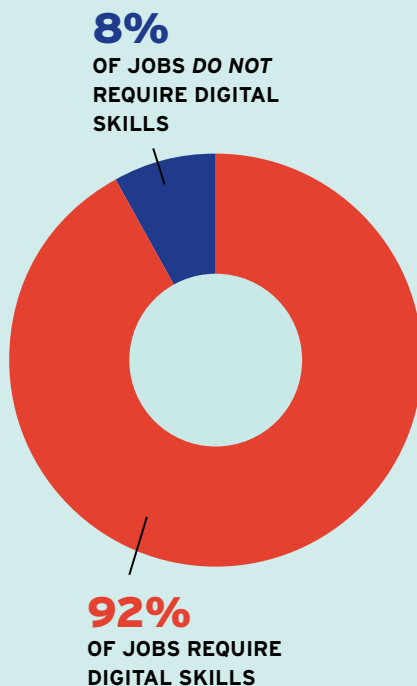
When people are asked about what makes a job a "good job," opportunities to train and advance matter. When asked to rank the distinctive characteristics of a good job including pay, predictable scheduling, paid sick leave, opportunities to train and advance skills, promotion opportunities, benefits, and having a voice in decision making – **opportunities to train and advance ranked first** – tied with promotion opportunities and benefits.¹⁰

BOTTOM LINE: Skills training delivers real economic gains for workers – especially those without a four-year degree – and gives more people a pathway to higher wages and career advancement in a rapidly changing economy.

3

A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORKPLACE REQUIRES ONGOING DIGITAL SKILL BUILDING

ACROSS INDUSTRIES, 92% OF JOBS REQUIRE DIGITAL SKILLS



STEPHANIE COLEMAN, CHIEF TALENT DEVELOPMENT OFFICER AT THE NASHVILLE AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

“When you look at specific skills that are needed for open positions, digital skills top the list. Right now, over 90% of open jobs require some kind of digital skill. You also see emerging technologies like AI that are really creating a need for rapid changes to our training programs.”

Digital skills are no longer optional; they are the foundation of nearly every job. Today, **92% of jobs require digital skills**, yet one-third of U.S. workers haven't had the opportunity to build even foundational digital skills (the essential abilities required to effectively use digital technologies in the workplace) – despite their readiness to learn and contribute.¹¹

The fast-changing nature of digital tools means workers aren't just playing catch-up; they're in a constant race to stay employable. To keep up, **workers need “just-in-time” upskilling opportunities**—training that happens right before new skills are needed. This approach aligns with how many adults prefer to learn, while also meeting businesses' real-time workforce needs. This is especially critical in areas and industries not traditionally seen as tech heavy¹² where tasks that once required little or no digital interaction are evolving to rely more heavily on digital tools and skills.

- ▶ **The retail sector** is now the third-largest employer of web and digital interface designers¹³ – a reflection of how central e-commerce has become to business success¹⁴.
- ▶ **In agriculture**, precision farming is transforming how crops are grown and harvested. At

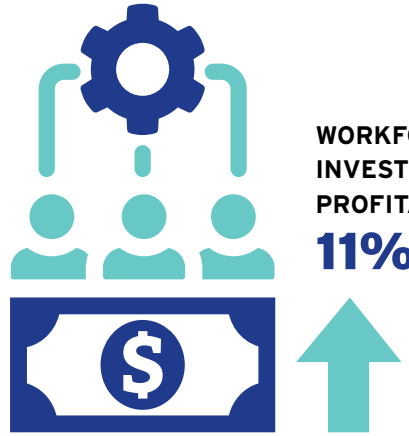
North Carolina State University, researchers are developing sensor technology to detect diseases in tomato crops¹⁵. And companies like John Deere now employ more software engineers than mechanical engineers¹⁶.

- ▶ **Rural communities** are also experiencing growing demand for tech workers. One study found that although 24,000 tech workers are currently employed in public-sector roles in rural areas, that number would double if rural communities were hiring at the same rate as urban counterparts.¹⁷
- ▶ **Manufacturing jobs** increasingly require digital proficiency. From operating CNC machines to managing inventory systems and reading digital blueprints, modern manufacturing roles demand digital skills.¹⁸

BOTTOM LINE: As technology transforms every industry, digital skills have become essential for workers to stay employable and for businesses to stay competitive. Ongoing, accessible training is key to keeping pace with a rapidly changing economy.

4

SKILLS TRAINING INVESTMENTS ARE A SMART BUSINESS STRATEGY



WORKFORCE TRAINING INVESTMENTS INCREASES PROFITABILITY BY **11%**



SARA BLAIR, HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER, COUNTRY MAID, INC.

When we collaborate with partners [on workforce training], we're not just filling jobs and retaining our team members –we're building a talent pipeline that will sustain our company, our community, and northwest Iowa for years to come.

Investing in skills training isn't just good for workers – it's a smart business strategy that helps companies retain employees, cut costs, boost profits, stay competitive, and sustain local economies.

94% of workers say they would stay longer at a company that invests in their learning and development.¹⁹ This retention matters because **turnover costs can range from \$25,000 to \$78,000** per worker – a financial burden that businesses can reduce through workforce training.²⁰ Companies that make these investments don't just avoid costly turnover; they also **increase their profitability by 11%** and are twice as likely to retain employees.²¹

While large corporations may have the resources to provide continuous training, small and mid-sized businesses rely on partnerships with the public workforce and education systems. That's why:

- ▶ **76%** of small and mid-sized business leaders say **increasing public investment in skills training** would help²² their business.
- ▶ **79%** support more **government funding** for training programs.²³
- ▶ **77% of small and mid-sized business leaders**²⁴ and **91% of voters**²⁵ support policies that create **closer links** between community colleges, training providers, and businesses to prepare people for in-demand jobs.



79%
OF SMALL AND MID-SIZE BUSINESS LEADERS SUPPORT MORE GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR TRAINING PROGRAMS

BOTTOM LINE: When businesses invest in skills—and when public systems support them—they don't just strengthen their workforce. They strengthen the economy.

5

KEY INDUSTRIES DEPEND ON SKILLS TRAINING TO FILL CRITICAL JOBS

The critical industries that are vital to our economy and quality of life depend on skills training.²⁶ This includes digital skills in unexpected sectors: Increasingly, that includes digital skills: today, more than 90% of jobs in manufacturing, utilities, and construction require them.²⁷ But too often, workers lack access to the training needed to step into these roles.



ANGIE BARKSDALE, CEO, WEST MICHIGAN WORKS!

We have identified five in-demand industries in West Michigan. And success to us is our employers [in those sectors] finding the talent that they need and being able to train...with their growing technology to meet their needs to stay productive. On the job seeker front, it's being able to help individuals get to that self-sustaining employment so they can meet the needs of their family and them as an individual. And being able to adjust to whatever's coming down the pipeline in the changing industries.

In the infrastructure and manufacturing sector:

- ▶ New federal laws supporting manufacturing, and infrastructure will **create 2.9 million jobs per year** over their lifespan. Two-thirds of these jobs will be in the construction and manufacturing sectors, and **69% will be available to workers with skills training** – without a bachelor's degree.²⁸

- ▶ Yet, **88% of construction contractors report facing difficulty finding skilled workers.**²⁹
- ▶ **65%** of U.S. manufacturers report that **attracting and retaining talent** is their primary business challenge.
- ▶ A lack of skilled manufacturing workers could result in **2.1 million unfilled jobs** between 2020 and 2030.³⁰

AN OVERWHELMING PERCENTAGE OF JOB OPENINGS REQUIRE DIGITAL SKILLS, ACROSS INDUSTRIES



In the health care sector:

- ▶ **85%** of healthcare facilities report a **shortage of skilled allied healthcare professionals.**³¹
- ▶ At the same time, demand for direct care workers is projected to increase by **48% for nursing assistants, 43% for personal care aides, and 42% for home health aides** between 2020 and 2035.³²

BOTTOM LINE: Critical industries like construction, manufacturing, and health care can't meet growing demand without a skilled workforce. Skills training is essential to filling these jobs, supporting economic growth, and ensuring that workers – especially those without a four-year degree – can access stable, well-paid careers.

6

A SKILLED WORKFORCE DRIVES ECONOMIC GROWTH



JUAN SALGADO,
CHANCELLOR OF CITY
COLLEGES OF CHICAGO

It's really an opportunity to make more, to contribute more to the local economy, to contribute more to your family economy and your community's economy.

73% SAY THAT EXPANDING SKILLS TRAINING IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT WAYS TO IMPROVE THE ECONOMY



Investing in skills training strengthens entire economies. Countries with a higher share of skilled workers experience higher productivity,³³ and local businesses thrive when they can find qualified employees.

Yet, more than **90% of U.S. state and local chambers of commerce** report that skilled worker shortages are hurting their economies³⁴, limiting growth and competitiveness. When workers gain new skills and increase their wages, it triggers ripple effects.

- ▶ Better-paid workers spend more, increasing economic activity, and contributing more in tax revenue.³⁵
- ▶ On a global scale, investing in education and training to expand workforce skills could add **\$6.5 trillion to global GDP**.³⁶
- ▶ Voters recognize the impact, with **73% saying that expanding skills training is one of the most important ways** to improve the economy.³⁷



INVESTING IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING COULD ADD **\$6.5 TRILLION** TO GLOBAL GDP

BOTTOM LINE: A skilled workforce fuels stronger economies - locally, nationally, and globally. Investing in skills training boosts productivity, supports business growth, and increases wages, creating a ripple effect that benefits families, communities, and the economy.

7

SKILLS TRAINING IS A NATIONAL PRIORITY



ROBERT ESPINOZA, CEO, NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION

Skills training is an issue that consistently unites voters across the spectrum. While there may be differing views from voters on other topics, voters across the board recognize that investing in skills training programs will empower workers of all backgrounds and help our economy thrive.

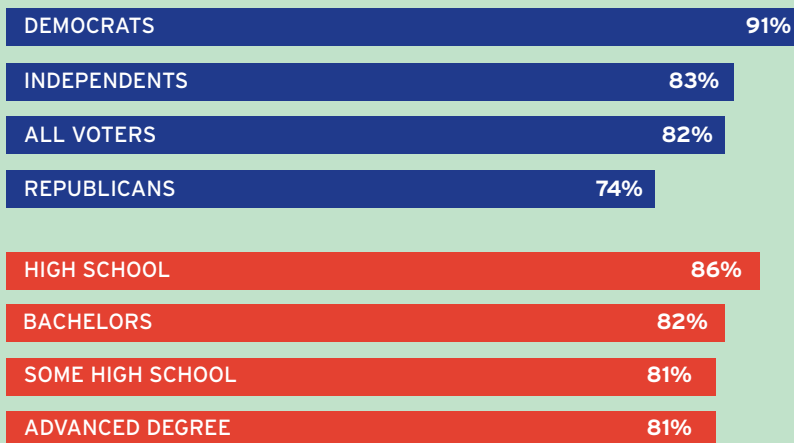
Voters across the political spectrum—**91% of Democrats, 74% of Republicans, and 83% of Independents**—support increasing government investment in workforce training. That’s not just bipartisan consensus—it’s a shared national priority.

But support for skills training goes beyond political identity. **Strong majorities across every region of the country, across races, genders, and backgrounds**

agree that investing in training strengthens the economy, helps businesses find qualified workers, and gives more people access to good jobs.

- ▶ **82% of all voters** support more government funding for skills training.
- ▶ Support is consistent nationwide: **85% in the Northeast and South, 80% in the West, and 76% in the Midwest.**³⁸
- ▶ Among veterans—nearly 200,000 service members transition to civilian life each year³⁹, many of whom rely on training programs to secure good jobs—**78% support increased investment in skills training.**⁴⁰

VOTERS ACROSS ALL DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES WANT GOVERNMENT TO INVEST IN WORKFORCE TRAINING



BOTTOM LINE: Skills training is one of the few issues with broad bipartisan and demographic support—giving policymakers a rare opportunity to unite Americans around a shared investment in our workforce and our future.

8

SKILLS TRAINING EXPANDS OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL COMMUNITIES

RURAL LEARNERS ARE **LESS LIKELY** TO HAVE A COLLEGE CREDENTIAL THAN THEIR URBAN AND SUBURBAN PEERS



LINDSAY BLUMER, CEO,
WRTP BIG STEP

Oftentimes people don't recognize that there are a multitude of occupations within manufacturing and construction. And if you've never seen yourself represented in those, you don't know those are particularly accessible to you.

Access to skills opens doors to better jobs and strengthens economic mobility – especially for workers who have historically been (and currently are) underrepresented in certain industries. Yet, systemic barriers still prevent many from accessing the skills training they need to succeed.

Thirty occupations are at especially high risk of automation. Workers across all racial and ethnic groups are employed in these roles – including **more than 30% of Latino workers, 27% of Black workers, 24% of white workers, and 20% of Asian American workers.**⁴¹ The threat of job loss from automation is broadly shared.

But the consequences won't be.

While automation puts many workers at risk, people of color and rural workers are more likely to

face structural barriers that make it harder to train for new careers and adapt to changing industries:

- ▶ People **of color have less access to skills training opportunities**, due in large part to factors like wealth gaps and uneven access to high-quality K-12 education.⁴²
- ▶ **Rural workers face fewer local training providers and limited broadband access.**

These longstanding disparities – which have limited access to training and pathways into higher-paying, in-demand jobs⁴³ – reflect a broader issue: the **absence of equitable skills training policies** that ensure all workers, including people of color, women, rural workers, and those without a college degree, can access the digital and technical training today's jobs require.

BOTTOM LINE: Expanding access to equitable skills training is essential unlocking opportunity for underserved communities. By removing structural barriers and ensuring all workers can build the skills today's jobs require, we can create a more inclusive economy where everyone has a chance to share in our nation's prosperity.



CONCLUSION: SKILLS TRAINING IS A KEY DRIVER OF ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

People across the U.S. understand the urgency of this issue and overwhelmingly support skills training. Nearly three-quarters (73%) believe expanding skills training is one of the most important ways to improve the economy – this solution is on par with other top economic proposals like cutting taxes for the middle class, slowing inflation, raising the minimum wage, and creating good jobs.⁴⁴

The numbers and the message are clear: policymakers have a mandate to act. Investing in skills training can ensure workers gain the right skills while businesses hire the talent they need. And it's also one of the smartest ways to strengthen local economies, expand opportunity, and fuel America's prosperity. When workers can access the training they need, they don't just find better jobs; they contribute more to their families, their communities, and the nation's economic future.



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National Skills Coalition (NSC) is a national coalition that works to meet the ever-changing needs of America's workforce. We organize diverse networks that help to change the conversation about work and advocate for workforce-strengthening policies so that more working people have access to a better life, local businesses around the country see sustained growth, and more communities experience prosperity.

Learn more at nationalskillscoalition.org.

