

Analyzing Middle Skills Jobs and Education Requirements

Mission

Over the past several years, increasing the attainment level of U.S. citizens has dominated education-related policy discussions and decisions. Projections have revealed that ensuring workers are educated for middle as well as high skills jobs is essential to accomplishing these goals. While there doesn't seem to be a consistently adopted method of identifying middle skills jobs, there is general agreement that they require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year college degree. It is also accepted that this can include more informal modes of education, such as on-the-job training.

Action

In partnership with another leading reform-oriented advocacy organization, HCM conducted research and analysis on the higher-level skills needed to advance in fields that start out as low-skill occupations. Specific framing questions included:

- What are low and middle skills jobs and what kinds of skills do they require?
- What opportunities exist for people to advance past low skills jobs? What pathways exist into middle skills jobs?
- What education, training and skill pathways turn "dead-end" or low skills jobs into opportunities for advancing into middle skills jobs?
- What characteristics/abilities/training are required for individuals to get promoted out of low skills work?
- What percent of people perform low skills work during some parts of their lives (early adulthood, retirement) or as part-time supplemental work (police moonlighting as security guards), but have middle- and high-skills work for some substantial part of their lives?
- In what ways can or does the data reframe the idea that most of the job growth will be in low skills occupations?

Impact

Our work confirmed that middle skills jobs are important for the future of the United States' global competitiveness because they offer a path to middle class wages and upward mobility. The work helped frame recommendations for the field around a set of key thematic areas:

- Increasing clarity on and bringing context to our national goal for educational attainment.
- Closing the skills mismatch.
- Creating and articulating career pathways.
- Defining the role of certificates.
- Capitalizing upon upcoming opportunities to inform federal policy.