



## Reconceptualizing Workers as Lifelong Learners

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In a rapidly evolving labor market impacted by a complex interaction of economic, demographic, and technological shifts, ensuring that workers remain competitive and that industry and employers' needs are met will depend on developing and maintaining up-to-date and relevant skills.

Skill requirements are changing. In a study conducted between 2016 and 2021, on average, 37 percent of the top skills requested for jobs in the United States changed, and one in five skills are new.<sup>1</sup> Automation and the development of emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence have and will continue to present opportunities for increased firm and worker productivity, but will possibly lead to disruptions across many occupations, displacing some jobs but creating others with new skill requirements.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the following decade, it is estimated that more than two-thirds of US jobs will require postsecondary education, training, or upskilling opportunities.<sup>3</sup> In a labor market that is far from static, the continuous acquisition of skills throughout an individual's working life will become key to remaining competitive.

Gaining relevant skills, however, has often been difficult for workers who face barriers that prevent them from fully engaging in the labor market and securing gainful employment that could in turn provide additional learning opportunities. In addition, industry and employer needs have often outpaced the ability of workforce and education systems to respond, let alone to individually and collectively support workers.<sup>4</sup> A lack of coordination and responsiveness between these systems has contributed to a mismatch between workers' skills and employer requirements.<sup>5</sup> This gap and the barriers that many workers face can contribute to a worker's reduced ability to pursue and secure gainful employment.

**Rather than single touchpoints with education and workforce training, workers will need opportunities to engage in continuous learning.**

Rather than single touchpoints with education and workforce training, whether through traditional degrees, credentials, or one-time vocational training programs, workers will need opportunities to engage in continuous learning, training, and skills-focused education throughout their lifetimes.<sup>6</sup> To fulfill labor market demand, the systems that support workers and their pursuits toward career

advancement should consider workers as not only talent, labor or human capital, but as active, lifelong learners.



*Education and workforce systems can better align to improve how workers and learners gain access to and transition through career pathways, engage with available programs and opportunities, and realize better employment outcomes.*

### **Workers as learners**

Workers are often considered individuals who are currently working or employed, but that definition does not encompass the wide variety of experiences "workers" may encounter in their lifetimes. Workers are not monoliths; they move through various employment statuses and face challenges that might make it difficult to work. For example, it is possible for an individual to exist in the labor market as someone who has been dislocated from a job, someone seeking to acquire skills, a caretaker, a non-English language speaker, a justice-affected individual, among many other life experiences—and each may pose barriers to employability.<sup>7</sup> Without considering the vast and varied worker experiences, it can be difficult to identify opportunities to better support them toward quality employment.

**Lifelong learning can encompass all the ways individuals grow in knowledge and skills in their careers.**

One shared experience among workers is the importance of learning as a pathway to employment. As identified in recent research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta,<sup>8</sup> acquiring skills or learning is a cornerstone for many workers as they seek career advancement. Learning can take many forms and depend heavily on workers' goals and where they are in life, personally or professionally. As such, lifelong learning can encompass all the ways individuals grow in knowledge and skills in their careers. This can include higher education, trade schools, job training, apprenticeships, experiential learning opportunities, credentials, and more.

Skills or credentials are often a prerequisite for quality employment and are linked to better employment outcomes such as resilience during economic downturns and higher lifetime earnings. Traditional educational attainment has positive implications for individual earnings,<sup>9</sup> civic participation, and social mobility,<sup>10</sup> as well as societal benefits and public returns such as through economic health.<sup>11</sup> Such benefits have motivated states and institutions to make efforts to advance a nationwide completion agenda with the goal of increasing the proportion of Americans with credentials.<sup>12</sup> Decades of research affirms higher education as a strong pathway to increased lifetime earnings<sup>13</sup> and lower unemployment<sup>14</sup>, but it is well documented that many learners face difficulty affording a degree because of the cost.<sup>15</sup> In addition, while a college degree may initially help workers gain a strong foothold as they join the labor market, it may not be enough to provide workers the skills they'll need throughout a lengthy career. Undoubtedly, higher education and degree pathways play an important role in learning, but lifelong learning and skill acquisition writ large could be less reliant on traditional credentials and include a wider spectrum of opportunities and activities: **digital learning, apprenticeships, trade or vocational schools, online open courses, and self-learning, among other alternative learning methods.**

Regardless of the pathway, a worker needs access to education and workforce systems that provide ongoing learning realized and reinforced through quality employment, opportunities for career guidance, development and advancement, and reskilling/upskilling. Reframing the worker experience as one of a lifelong learner may help policymakers and practitioners more broadly consider and address many of the challenges in connecting workers with employment opportunities.

**Rather than the current disjointed systems, the workforce and education ecosystems can be optimized to serve a larger and more diverse worker population.**

Potential exists for education and workforce training systems to be reconsidered as collaborative and interdependent support structures that equip individuals of all ages and backgrounds for a lifelong journey that often combines and alternates between working and learning. Rather than the current disjointed systems, the workforce and education ecosystems can be optimized to serve a larger and more diverse worker population. Making the “lifelong learner” a more prominent aspect of workforce development solutions requires first understanding the many employment situations workers might find themselves in and then tailoring solutions that solve for those scenarios. While there is no singular solution, better coordination and collaboration between education and workforce systems would pave a smoother path to learning and better employment outcomes for all workers.

### ***The untapped collaborative potential of education and workforce***

To better serve workers, education and workforce training should address the systemic challenges that prevent learners from gaining the skills they need. A great deal of untapped potential exists to better deliver on relevant value of acquired skills in the market, access to quality training programs, reduced cost burden for the learner, and greater flexibility within career pathways.

Many learners today work while attending school part-time, raising children or taking care of other dependents. This can present barriers to fully engaging in learning or completing credentials quickly enough, if at all, to improve employment prospects.<sup>16</sup> Pathways for learning often lack ways to address

these competing priorities while consistently offering equitable access, affordability, and the realization of improved individual outcomes like employability and higher wages. Together, education and workforce systems could offer more comprehensive supports and clearly articulated links between systems to address these challenges. Beyond improving individual outcomes, more close collaboration between education and workforce systems could aid in the development of training programs better aligned to industry demand. Programs that offer relevant skills and credentials have the potential to yield more talent to fill the needs of employers and the economy.

The learning marketplace has career pathways across education and workforce for workers to pursue, but neither system is perfectly equipped to fully meet the needs of learners and satisfy evolving industry demand. There are opportunities for education and workforce to better align and improve how learners enter career pathways, engage with programs, and ultimately realize better employment outcomes.

### ***Emerging trends, solutions, and developments***

Ongoing and emerging trends show promising solutions and innovations that support workers as learners, blurring the lines between workforce and education systems and putting lifelong learners front and center.

In recent years, for example, trends in skills-based practices among employers have prioritized the attainment and demonstration of skills and competencies over traditional degrees and credentials, offering a practical solution to today's labor shortages while helping remove critical barriers to career pathways for a more diverse group of workers.<sup>17</sup> An increased priority on skills may also encourage an increase in employer-based funding for education and training as employers seek to fill talent shortages and build a better-trained labor force.<sup>18</sup>

The apprenticeship system, still lacking in scale and funding, continues to show steady progress in non-trade jobs, providing individuals with more affordable forms of instruction that combine classroom and work-based learning while they earn an income and forgo levels of student debt often acquired by their degreed peers.<sup>19</sup> The power of data also offers the potential to identify opportunities for solutions in the shared education and workforce marketplace. Many states and municipalities are leading the way, finding ways to meaningfully integrate system-level data. These efforts create a more complete view of a learner regardless of where they are, within a pathway or beyond. Full visibility into learner mobility and outcomes is critical to informed decision-making toward learner success at all levels of policy and practice.<sup>20</sup> Another emerging evidence-based practice pairs wraparound supports with the programmatic aspects of education and training.<sup>21</sup> Centering learning for workers encourages a more holistic approach to address workers' nonacademic needs such as career development and navigation, transportation assistances, childcare, emergency aid, mental health services, and food and housing assistance.

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These and other emerging innovations help point the way to further improvements in fostering increased alignment between education and employment. Amid ongoing technological and demographic shifts in the labor market, placing lifelong learners at the core of policy discussions helps ensure that the workforce and education ecosystems can better foster the conditions necessary to increase workforce readiness and economic resilience. Lifelong learning has become an economic

imperative around which policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can coalesce in ensuring maximum sustainable employment and mobility among workers and learners.

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<sup>8</sup> Horton, Tiffani and Elizabeth Bogue Simpson. “Worker Voices Special Brief: Pursuing Advancement through Personal Investment.” *Fed Communities*, January 2024. <https://fedcommunities.org/research/worker-voices/2023-pursuing-advancement-through-personal-investment-special-brief/>

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