The Right Jobs:
Identifying Career Advancement Opportunities for Low-Skilled Workers

A Guide for Public and Private Sector Workforce Development Practitioners

By Susan Goldberger, Newell Lessell, and Radha Roy Biswas

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Right Jobs provides workforce policymakers and directors of workforce development programs with a methodology to:

- Identify the most promising employment opportunities within reach of low-skill workers;

- Determine the postsecondary training and career preparation routes that will yield results for their clients; and

- Make the case for investment to public and private funders.

The Right Jobs reveals opportunities in a wide range of industries and occupations, including transportation, construction, customer service, automotive repair, and information technology. Counter-balancing these opportunities are several barriers that make it difficult for less-educated workers to gain access to these occupations. The report presents a range of program designs and strategies to help low-skill workers overcome these obstacles.

The Right Jobs begins with a close look at the numbers.

What jobs are projected to grow? What jobs offer good starting wages with potential for advancement? What jobs are accessible without a four-year college degree? To answer these questions, *The Right Jobs* applies a series of quantitative screens to occupational data compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics on 725 discrete occupations. An earnings screen brings the number down to 527, an educational attainment screen narrows the field to 347, an availability screen reduces it to 20, and a work experience screen yields a list of 16 occupations for further consideration. Collectively, the BLS projects these 16 occupations to offer over 700,000 new job opportunities per year nationally.

The second step considers risk factors associated with the target occupations.

BLS employment projections do not always capture current dynamics. JFF has identified three fundamental risks that could reduce demand for an occupation: offshoring, technological innovation, and industry decline. Five of the sixteen occupations identified in step one are at medium or high risk of offshoring; seven are at medium or high risk of technological innovation.

Taking a Closer Look at Occupational Clusters: Going Beyond the Numbers

The next step is a qualitative analysis. Industry sources serve as an important "reality check" on the quantitative analysis.

From the sixteen occupations identified in the quantitative research, JFF identified a diverse sample of six occupational clusters for fine grained investigation: nursing, customer service representative, automotive and truck technician, computer support specialist, building trades, and commercial drivers. This analysis goes beyond the numbers to evaluate the suitability of these occupations as advancement targets for less-skilled workers and to better understand what it would take to help individuals secure one of these jobs. Interviews with employers and training providers probe a variety of issues, including the accessibility of training programs, evolving hiring requirements, long-term career advancement options, and stability of demand.

This investigation identified three types of *barriers* hindering the advancement of less-educated workers into these six occupations:

Barriers to entering and completing training programs: High academic requirements for entry, long training programs, the lack of evening and part-time enrollment options, high tuition costs, and competition for limited training spots pose significant obstacles to less-educated workers who need to earn a living while attending school. For example, Registered Nurse, the most promising occupation in terms of number of openings and salary, presents several access barriers, including high academic requirements, a very competitive selection process for Associate's degree programs, and a typi-

cal program of three years of full-time study to earn a degree. In contrast, Licensed Practical Nurse training programs which are one year long and emphasize more practical hands-on learning, offer a more accessible first step into the nursing field.

Barriers to gaining employment after completing training: For several occupations, including nursing, automotive and truck technician, and the skilled building trades, completing a training or apprenticeship program and earning a license or certification virtually guarantees a job. But this is not the case for computer support specialist; employers are reticent to hire training program graduates who do no have work experience in the field.

Barriers to identifying the "right jobs" within broad occupational clusters. Customer service representative jobs generally require neither postsecondary credentials nor intensive pre-employment training, making them the most accessible of the six occupational clusters investigated. However, the quality of CSR jobs varies widely, as do advancement opportunities. Rarely are the promotional routes (or their absences) transparent to a job applicant.

After identifying these barriers, JFF's investigation shifted to identifying effective strategies and best-in-class job preparation programs to help low-skill workers surmount them. For example, *The Right Jobs* profiles four innovative employer- and union-sponsored programs that prepare nursing assistants and other entry-level health care workers to become LPNs. These programs provide academic remediation at or near the worksite to prepare workers to pass the LPN entrance exam, flexible part-time and evening class and clinical schedules, employer tuition payments, and ongoing tutoring and counseling.

The Right Jobs also profiles an innovative training program called Year Up that has had outstanding success placing low-skilled urban young adults in computer support specialist positions. Year Up provides participants with six months of technical and professional skills training tailored to employer specifications, followed by a six-month, paid internship. Also highlighted are programs that help workers overcome barriers to entry into skilled trades work and commercial driving.

Making the Right Jobs More Accessible: Lessons for Program Design and Policy

The Right Jobs offers a number of lessons for program design and policy in the interest of making it possible for low-skill workers to advance up the job ladder.

Program Design and Operation

Local and state workforce planning organizations (e.g., WIBs) need to go beyond the published numbers of job openings to determine the most promising opportunities. This further investigation includes a careful evaluation of employer hiring needs and practices and the accessibility of training for low-skill workers. It also includes identifying the subset of jobs in broad occupational categories that offers the best prospects for advancement.

Programs designed to advance low-skill workers must provide the full complement of skills training, work experience, and employer connections necessitated by current hiring practices within targeted occupations.

Embedding training for skilled jobs within employer-sponsored advancement programs that offer intensive remedial instruction at or near the work worksite, with ample support, flexible schedules, and clear rewards in promotion and pay, are particularly effective. Similarly, adult basic education that seamlessly transitions to college coursework best prepares low-skill workers to meet the academic demands of further skill training.

Public Policy

The heavy remedial education and personal support needs of less-educated workers can reasonably be met only by a combination of private and public funds. Employers can and should be willing to invest in the training of workers who will become increasingly valuable employees, but employers cannot be expected to bear the full costs of preparing their lowest-skilled for meaningful occupational advancement. Public funds are critical to making "grow your own" workforce strategies economically viable and attractive to employers.

States need to set targets for the participation of low-income working adults in occupational education programs leading to well-paying jobs—and then hold publicly funded institutions accountable for meeting those targets. Education and training funds should be allocated through a competitive, performance-based system that rewards innovation and improvement and is open to all program sponsors, not just traditional postsecondary training institutions.

Funds should be made available to help WIBs and other workforce intermediaries gain the capacity to analyze local labor markets and direct program development energies toward the most promising occupational opportunities. Similarly, new public and private financing mechanisms should be created to help program developers follow the market, shifting from declining occupational areas to more promising ones.

From the Entry Level to Licensed Practical Nurse: Four Case Studies of Career Ladders in Health Care

By Susan Goldberger

These case studies describe four innovative Licensed Practical Nurse training programs that serve low-income adults who work in entry-level health care jobs. The programs illustrate strategies for advancement described in *The Right Jobs: Identifying Career Advancement Opportunities for Low-Skilled Workers.*

To download *From the Entry Level to Licensed Practical Nurse,* go to: www.jff.org/jff/kc/library/0262