

# Upward Pathways



CORPORATE  
SOLUTIONS

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*Executive Summary*

# Background

Tyson, a Fortune 73 company, is one of the largest food processors in the world, with more than 55 sites across 29 states, and spanning 139,000 team members. Across Tyson's national footprint, 60 percent of frontline workers (called team members) are immigrants and refugees representing more than 60 countries. In any given plant, more than 50 different languages are spoken, and the education levels, training, and English-language proficiency of frontline team members vary widely.

Nationally, [60 to 70 percent of frontline workers](#)' have not accessed the literacy, numeracy, and, and problem-solving training that can aid with job growth, and only [1 in 10 employees](#) reported participating in an education class over the past year. This indicates a real opportunity for employers to offer opportunities for talent to advance and meet business needs.

Like many employers, Tyson Foods has jobs that can be difficult to fill. While team members do advance to more skilled positions within the plants, Tyson sought to formalize distinct pathways including consistent advancement rubrics or criteria across plants. Often the solution for Tyson was to hire industrial maintenance staff externally rather than from within, which meant they competed with other

employers for the same pool of candidates, often recent high school graduates from career and technical education programs or those coming from other external training programs. This required Tyson to attempt to compete for the interests of high school students and also limited the company to hiring around high school or credential graduation dates.

According to labor market data from [Burning Glass Technologies](#), median wages in food production roles hover around \$13 per hour, while maintenance and repair workers command a median hourly wage of \$18 within the food manufacturing sector, with plenty of room for advancement.

## The Development of Upward Pathways

Recognizing the potential of their diverse frontline workforce, Tyson launched [Upward Academy](#) in 2016. Upward Academy, now offered in 59 locations, offers participants the opportunity to build English-language fluency, work on foundational skills, and earn a high school equivalency. And it works. A [comparison group study](#) of the program found a return on investment (ROI) of 123 percent for Tyson, meaning that for every dollar Tyson spent on Upward Academy, it gained \$1.23 from increased retention of participants.

In 2020, based on the success of Upward Academy and the recognition that further skill development was desired, Tyson launched Upward Pathways to invest in the career ambitions of team members and fill essential job openings. Upward Pathways is Tyson's in-plant career development program, focusing on training frontline team members in specific workforce skills, employability skills, and digital fluency to fill essential job openings. It targets team members who have completed Upward Academy, as well as those who have more advanced skills than the curriculum offered in UA but still need to develop others to be eligible for promotion.

JFF's goal is to support innovative employer partners to develop the strongest learning systems possible.

JFF was contracted by Tyson in 2019 to help support the career advancement of frontline team members and to assist in the development and implementation of the idea that would become Upward Pathways. Our shared goal was to support workers who require English language and basic employability skills to gain access to additional skill training needed to progress in the workplace. JFF approached this partnership with an understanding that this project could help Tyson identify ways to further its investment, impact frontline team members, and formalize career pathways to provide more equitable development opportunities for all.

## Approach

At the outset of the project in 2019, Tyson Foods and JFF committed to three broad design principles for Upward Pathways.

- 1. The program would have to meet team members where they are:** This is a unique attribute of this program because most training programs require an initial level of proficiency. Upward Pathways was designed for open access and includes those who, for example, need additional support in English-language learning or math.
- 2. It must advance their skills to match vacant higher wage roles within the company:** This allows Tyson to meet its internal promotion goals.
- 3. It must be efficient and streamlined:** Tyson wanted to optimize its programming by using services that local education partners had already funded and were prepared to provide. This allowed for a quick launch of the program and avoided duplication of already available resources.

Because of Tyson's work with Upward Academy, leaders in the company already had a broad sense of the academic skill levels and English-language proficiency of their frontline workforce. Tyson also knew that industrial maintenance roles

were especially hard to fill. Despite the robust on-the-job training program that already existed to support entry-level maintenance workers, most frontline workers still required targeted skills or English-language development to succeed in that training. Simply, Tyson had a set of hard-to-fill roles in a teachable specialty, and an almost-ready workforce that could fill them if provided with the right bridging learning opportunities.

## **Building the Credential**

Tyson required a system to determine, with consistency, the education and English proficiency level of every employee, along with the discrete skills and competencies needed for higher-level jobs. Upward Pathways required translating the occupational data into the educational competencies that are the currency of local education systems. In other words, Upward Pathways requires the alignment of the competencies needed from education and training, and teaches those skills within a contextualized pathway.

For example, most education providers would not be surprised to learn that industrial maintenance workers must be able to “measure distances or dimensions” as a part of their work on the plant floor. But what level of math skills and specific

competencies are required to be able to do that? That depends on the context, including the level of precision needed and the types of measurement tasks that these workers are doing.

JFF, in cooperation with Tyson, built an evidence-based process to surface this kind of information. Starting with standard, scientifically-validated descriptions of industrial maintenance roles from [O\\*NET](#) (a database of competencies and workforce activities managed and validated through rigorous study by the Department of Labor), JFF researchers interviewed Tyson experts to add detail and context. Next, JFF engaged subject matter experts (co-authors of adult education’s national adult education benchmarks, called Career and College Readiness Standards) to map each key job activity to a set of standard adult education competencies and benchmarks, effectively translating the occupation into a set of reading, math, and English language skills. The resulting competency map is a first of its kind. It illustrates all the most important activities that industrial maintenance workers at Tyson must be able to do, and links those activities to nationally-recognized academic standards for adult education classroom instruction.

## The Pilot

Tyson selected an initial group of eight community college education providers and 11 participating Tyson plants to pilot [Upward Pathways](#). JFF brought together experts from the pilot sites along with Tyson training leads and adult education experts in a series of workshops designed to validate the map and empower academic instructors to utilize the rich data contained therein. Once validated, the competency map accelerated the design process for pilot sites, which will work with Tyson team members to upgrade their skills to match requirements for industrial maintenance roles using service delivery models based on the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Thanks to an additional investment from the [Mariam Assefa Fund](#) at World Education Services (WES), three of the sites will also be providing supportive services such as technology or transit assistance to participants.

The pilots are serving a diversity of locations and worker populations, but have a common goal: they hope to create authentic learning and advancement opportunities for participants, while helping partner Tyson plants build a robust talent pipeline for industrial maintenance. More importantly, the pilots will generate valuable learning about what it takes to

transition a large, diverse workforce into higher-level, higher-wage occupations in the real world. Through direct feedback from Tyson leaders in the plants, Tyson and JFF will be able to refine the Upward Pathways strategy and understand how it might scale in the future to benefit more workers or apply to other advancement pathways.

## Considerations

Investing in existing talent to fill next-level jobs is more important than ever before. Though the pandemic is receding in the United States, unemployment is still higher than pre-pandemic rates and [businesses can't fill their open jobs fast enough](#). Hiring and retaining workers has been particularly difficult for employers with large entry-level workforces that require little formal education for employment, and many are experimenting with [increasing wages](#) to attract new employees. Additionally, frontline workers with limited educational credentials are often not prioritized in talent strategies or education and training budgets.. Employers [spend 17 percent of their formal training and education budgets](#) on workers with a high school diploma or less, as compared to the 58 percent they spend developing employees with a bachelor's degree or higher. In a survey, [89 percent of employers](#) said they offer their frontline

employees training opportunities but 73 percent said they don't know how many participate in the programs.

Tyson's model for talent development is innovative for the scale of the frontline workforce, the company's interest in advancing its immigrant and refugee workers, and the way it leverages existing workforce development and adult education resources to support incumbent workers—allowing the company to meet its hiring demands sustainably and predictably. It's a win-win situation.

If you are interested in developing a similar program, keep in mind the following considerations:

- 1. Internal training experts must be involved:** The training leads in industrial maintenance enabled our team to ensure that we identified an accurate list of job activities to include in the competency map.
- 2. Adult education subject-matter experts can create efficiencies:** By partnering with the co-authors of adult education's national adult education benchmarks, called Career and College Readiness Standards, we ensured each job activity was accurately mapped to the adult education benchmarks in math, reading, and English.
- 3. Additional support services may be necessary:** The funding from WES enables participants at three sites to reduce some of the opportunity costs associated with additional training, and increase retention and success. For example, the provision of computers and wireless internet enables participants to complete homework on their own time, increasing their flexibility and potentially increasing their likelihood of success. We aim to track the outcomes of the supportive services grants to test our hypothesis that these additional benefits are necessary to the retention and completion of many participants.
- 4. Complementary partnership is key:** JFF partnered with Tyson to help the company go the last mile to execute the work. Tyson had already identified the opportunity to connect two existing public programs offering basic skills education and contextualized workforce training, and developed the internal buy-in. JFF engineered a process to match desired skills with next-level job requirements using networks and experts to accelerate the job mapping process and worked with the Tyson team through the piloting phase. If you are interested in learning more please email us ([labs@jff.org](mailto:labs@jff.org)) and check out our Corporate Action Platform work [here](#).



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