



OP-ED

Report: Americans are finding work, but the better-paying jobs require a college degree

BY EDUARDO J. PADRÓN AND EDWARD ALDEN

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This should be a great time to look for work in the United States. The official unemployment rate has fallen below four percent for the first time since July of 2001. More companies are offering hiring bonuses to attract workers, and the retirement of baby boomers is opening more jobs for young adults.

However, the numbers are not as rosy as they look. While jobs are plentiful, good jobs are increasingly hard to find, especially for those without access to higher education. As technology and global competition continue to reshape the work landscape, too many of the new jobs are low-wage, with few benefits or possibilities for advancement, while the better jobs require education and skills that remain beyond the reach of way too many Americans.

In our new Council on Foreign Relations Task Force report, *The Work Ahead*, we offer recommendations regarding how business, educators, and governments can ensure that Americans are prepared for the better-paying jobs of the new global knowledge economy. The Task Force was co-chaired by former Michigan governor John Engler and former Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker. In the report, we argue that rebuilding the pathway from education to opportunity in the face of accelerating technological change is the critical challenge of our time.

We live in an age of great disruption. It was not that long ago that Americans could go into factories and offices with relatively little education, doing mostly repetitive tasks, and be able to earn a good wage that gave them the opportunity to buy a home, have a couple of cars, put their children through school, and retire with a decent pension.

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That is no longer the case. Today, with automation and global competition replacing many routine jobs, good opportunities are harder to find. Jobs that can be filled by those with only high school educations or less too often do not provide people with an opportunity to attain the American Dream and build a secure life. One in four Americans is now working in a low-wage job, by far the highest percent of any advanced economy.

How do we prepare young people and those already in the labor market to succeed in such a fast-moving economy? In the report, we contend that education and training are the core pieces. Many good jobs will be created by technology – the occupation of “web developer” did not even exist until 20 years ago, but today employs 150,000 Americans at a median salary of \$66,000. But these jobs will require higher educational and skill levels, and far more job-related and work-study opportunities in schools so that students are truly ready for the job market.

It is not just technical skills. Companies of today are looking for problem solvers, for critical thinkers, for people who can work well in teams, and for people who can work comfortably in cross-cultural situations. And those skills are not being taught in most educational institutions today.

Some places are starting to figure this out. At Miami Dade College, which is the largest campus-based institution of higher education in the country, every single program created in the last decade was made possible because of close cooperation between industry and educators. For example, the college created the first data analytics bachelor’s degree in the state of Florida, because of involvement by companies like Siemens, NextEra, and Google. Students graduating from that program are almost all finding jobs, and at much higher starting salaries than the typical four-year graduate. The same is true in robotics, in cybersecurity, in logistics and supply chain management.

In Colorado, the state is working with the Markle Foundation, LinkedIn, and Microsoft to unite business and educators to help prepare young people for the jobs in information technology, advanced manufacturing, and health care, and to ensure that the paths to better jobs are clearly understood and open to all. Twenty state governors agreed earlier this year to launch similar initiatives in their states.

Such efforts need to be expanded, however. Every young person should have the opportunity to do some sort of job-related training while in school, including a significant expansion of apprenticeships and internships. Career counselling at most high schools and colleges is woefully inadequate. A three-year pilot project at the City University of New York, which serves mostly low-income students, found that intensive counselling and career guidance doubled graduation rates at the community college level.

And every job-seeker – whether a younger student or a mid-career employee – should have access to the data needed to make better educational and career decisions. They should know with some confidence the costs of different educational choices and the job opportunities and financial rewards available for earning those important credentials.

Measures like these that bring opportunity within reach for far more of our citizens would truly make it a great time to look for work in America.

EDUARDO J. PADRÓN IS PRESIDENT OF MIAMI DADE COLLEGE AND A BOARD MEMBER OF THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. EDWARD ALDEN IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT CFR, AND PROJECT DIRECTOR FOR THE TASK FORCE REPORT THE WORK AHEAD: MACHINES, SKILLS AND U.S. LEADERSHIP IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.