



SYNERGY WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE FUTURE: **A PARADIGM SHIFT**

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# Executive Summary

Workforce development is a critical challenge that spans industries, affecting economic growth, productivity, and innovation. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities, particularly in the skilled trades, where chronic labor shortages continue to hinder businesses. For too long, the emphasis on 4-year degrees has contributed to a growing talent gap, leaving essential industries without the workforce they need.

Addressing this crisis requires a paradigm shift—one that expands awareness of career-connected learning, aligns education with industry needs, and repositions skilled trades as essential and desirable career paths. Employers, policymakers, and educators must work together to implement solutions that strengthen the workforce pipeline.

Synergy Workforce Solutions (SWS) is leading the charge, leveraging data-driven insights, employer branding strategies, and workforce development initiatives to bridge the workforce gap and drive long-term economic sustainability. By fostering collaboration, rethinking recruitment, and investing in workforce development programs, SWS is helping to build a future-ready workforce.

## Introduction

Finding and keeping good workers has never been easy, but today's challenges are different. There's a growing disconnect between available jobs and public awareness of career opportunities—especially in the skilled trades. For decades, the emphasis on 4-year degrees has sidelined vocational training, leaving industries with significant labor shortages.

The COVID-19 pandemic only made things worse. Industries like construction, advanced manufacturing, and healthcare infrastructure struggled to meet demand because there simply weren't enough trained workers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), skilled trades experienced some of the highest job vacancy rates after the pandemic, with shortages in welding, plumbing, and electrical work slowing down progress across industries.

This paper takes a close look at workforce development, focusing on the skilled trades and how we can create a more sustainable pipeline of workers.

### COVID impact

Skilled trades experienced some of the highest job vacancy rates after the pandemic

# 56%<sup>1</sup>

Increase in Construction job openings - 2020 to 2022

# 2.1 million

### Manufacturing jobs unfilled by 2030

A study conducted by Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute projects that 2.1 million manufacturing jobs could go unfilled by 2030 due to a lack of skilled labor

## A Necessary Collaborative Approach

For workforce development to be truly effective, a coordinated effort among multiple stakeholders is essential. While an ideal ecosystem would see seamless collaboration between employers, educators, policymakers, and workforce development organizations, many of these connections are still underdeveloped, limiting the effectiveness of workforce initiatives. This ecosystem ensures that workforce initiatives are strategic, data-driven, and responsive to industry and economic changes.

At its core, this ecosystem functions through interdependence:

- **EMPLOYERS** must redefine recruitment strategies, invest in work-based learning programs, and adopt employer branding to attract talent.
- **EDUCATORS** need to integrate real-world skills into curricula, expand career-connected learning, and expose students to diverse pathways beyond traditional four-year degrees.
- **POLICYMAKERS** play a crucial role in developing policies and funding mechanisms to support training programs, incentivize employer participation, and align education with workforce demands.
- **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS** serve as intermediaries, ensuring alignment between education and industry needs, supporting training infrastructure, and fostering collaboration.

Despite efforts to strengthen workforce development, gaps persist in the ecosystem. Without meaningful employer engagement, training programs may not align with real labor market needs, leaving industries with a mismatch between skills and job demands. Similarly, limited policy support can result in underfunded or fragmented workforce initiatives, reducing their effectiveness. Educators must adapt curricula to evolving industry trends, ensuring students graduate with skills that are relevant and applicable.

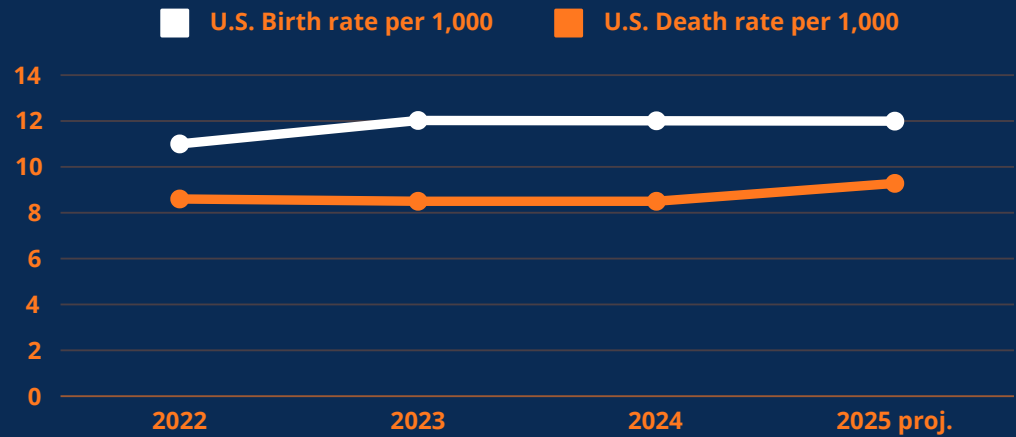


A well-integrated workforce development ecosystem remains an aspirational goal—one that, if fully realized, would create stronger career pathways, foster economic resilience, and provide a steady pipeline of skilled workers to meet future demands.

# Common Challenges

**THE WORKFORCE IS AGING.** Retirements are outpacing new hires, especially in manufacturing and healthcare. A study conducted by Deloitte and The Manufacturing Institute projects that 2.1 million manufacturing jobs could go unfilled by 2030 due to a lack of skilled labor.

Compounding this challenge, demographic trends indicate that more people are dying than being born in many regions, further shrinking the available labor force. Without a steady influx of younger workers to replace retirees, industries reliant on skilled labor face an ongoing crisis that requires immediate and strategic workforce development efforts.



## Technology is shifting jobs, not replacing them

Automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are reshaping industries, but they are not necessarily replacing workers; rather, they are shifting them into new roles. A McKinsey & Company report highlights that U.S. manufacturing and construction sectors are facing a hiring crunch for skilled workers such as carpenters, electricians, welders, and plumbers.

As automation takes over repetitive tasks, it is creating a demand for highly skilled workers who can oversee, maintain, and optimize these systems.

Research indicates that AI is unlikely to replace workers in skilled trades, as these roles require hands-on problem-solving, adaptability, and specialized expertise that automation cannot easily replicate. A report by Angi Research and Economics states that 'until a mobile robot can diagnose your busted HVAC or unclog a toilet, trade jobs are pretty safe from AI disruption.'

**63%** Students open to a pathway other than a 4-yr college

Students and job seekers aren't hearing about these careers. The *Question the Quo* June 2023 report reveals that 74% of high school students feel pressured to pursue a 4-year degree, often overlooking alternatives like vocational training and apprenticeships. Only 13% of surveyed teens feel prepared to make decisions about their career paths, highlighting the need for better career guidance and exposure to skilled trades. Nearly half of high school students think about their post-graduation path daily, yet many lack access to information on career-connected education. Additionally, only 22% of students report that their school provides information about trade programs, and 69% say they would be open to non-traditional pathways if they had more knowledge about them. These findings emphasize the need for better outreach and visibility of skilled trades careers.

A report from The Manufacturing Institute suggests that expanding industry outreach efforts could significantly increase interest and participation in these career paths.

## A Call to Action for Employers, Policymakers, and Educators

The workforce challenges industries face today cannot be addressed with outdated approaches, and each key stakeholder—employers, policymakers, and educators—has a role in shifting the paradigm. The ongoing labor shortages in the skilled trades, exacerbated by demographic shifts and technological advancements, demand a forward-thinking strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in workforce pipelines but also underscored the urgent need to rebuild them in a more resilient, adaptable manner.

**Employers** must take a proactive role by redefining recruitment strategies, strengthening work-based learning programs, and investing in continuous workforce training. Partnering with educators and workforce organizations can help develop pipelines that address industry needs while providing meaningful career pathways.

**Policymakers** must ensure that workforce policies support industry demands by funding career and technical education programs, developing incentives for employers who invest in workforce development, and implementing policies that facilitate seamless collaboration between education and industry.

**Educators** must prioritize career-connected learning, integrating work-based experiences such as apprenticeships, internships, and industry partnerships into curricula.

By working together, these three groups can create a sustainable workforce ecosystem that aligns with both industry demands and job seeker expectations.



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# Our Team



## **John Lewis**

### **Managing Partner & Co-founder**

John has over 15 years of experience in workforce development, designing talent pipelines and employer partnerships. He has led national workforce initiatives and developed programs to attract and retain skilled trades talent. John chairs the Manufacturers Association of Maine's workforce development committee.



## **Chelsea Tufts**

### **Director of Employer Branding & Client Relations**

Chelsea specializes in employer branding, recruitment marketing, and process improvement. With a background in HR, marketing, and systems design, she helps businesses attract and retain talent by developing compelling brand identities, targeted outreach strategies, and streamlined hiring processes.



## **Ed Coull**

### **Managing Partner & Co-founder**

Ed brings 30+ years of experience in workforce strategy, talent acquisition, and training initiatives. He has worked extensively with employers to create sustainable workforce solutions, helping industries develop skilled talent pipelines and improve hiring and retention strategies.