

The Future of Work

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New technologies and alternative work arrangements are transforming the American labor market. Can the country leverage the ingenuity that created the dynamic 21st-century workplace to improve pathways to upward mobility? We identify six ideas that can improve the future for all workers.

The Problem

The promise that hard work pays off is eroding for many in the 21st century. And the changing nature of work means that workers increasingly cannot access protections and benefits once taken for granted.

- Fewer jobs provide good wages, benefits, and protections. In 2015, almost a quarter of working Americans earned poverty-level wages.
- Alternative work arrangements that offer fewer worker protections have increased.

Every worker in America should be economically secure

- With the decline in jobs covered by unions, fewer workers have power through collective bargaining or collective voice.
- Automation and artificial intelligence are reshaping work.
- A growing number of people is disconnected from the labor market.

These changes affect more than income, because work has benefits that go beyond wages and salaries.

Through work, people access benefits, gain experience

and skills, connect with their community, and often find structure and meaning.

The Solution

We envision a future in which all workers have the economic security that employment in America should afford. To realize that vision, we suggest six critical reforms.

1. **Extend basic protections to all workers.** Workers in alternative arrangements need access to the same basic protections that full-time wage workers have, including eligibility for minimum wage and overtime protections, the right to collectively bargain, discrimination protection, unemployment and workers compensation, disability insurance, and access to retirement plans.
2. **Pilot and scale models for portable benefits.** With the rise in contract work and people working for multiple employers, basic benefits that travel with workers will be a foundation for economic security.
3. **Support a strong role for workers in shaping the future.** Invest in organizations that advocate on behalf of workers, create alliances for underserved workers across sectors, and strengthen platforms that allow workers to have a voice in improving working conditions.

4. **Test wage subsidies for the most vulnerable.** Pilot a subsidized jobs program that offers longer-term wage subsidies, job guarantees, and skill development for those with serious barriers to obtaining and maintaining work. We also suggest examining whether a permanent subsidy program for lower-wage jobs could help disadvantaged workers.
5. **Expand the earned income tax credit.** Expand the value of the credit for all adults, especially adults not living with children; include younger workers; and raise the maximum age at which people can receive the credit from 65 to 67 in line with the scheduled change in the retirement age for full Social Security benefits.
6. **Support a comprehensive strategy for improving jobs in the care sector.** Jobs in some rapidly growing sectors, like care work, have low wages, less generous or no benefits, fewer legal protections, and limited ways for workers to change their working environments. These sectors need to improve in the near term and develop a deeper strategy for rewarding and supporting the skills and experience of workers over their careers.

WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

Philanthropy can fund research on these innovations, support institutions and coalitions that implement these reforms, and ensure that commitments to worker voice, equity, and inclusion remain a central focus in crafting new policies and practices.

WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO

Government can support data collection on the changing nature of work, collaborate to develop and test new labor protections, lead by example with high-road employment practices, hold low-road employers accountable, and leverage procurement to foster best practices.

WHAT DOES “MOBILITY” FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty’s definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

Transforming the future of work is part of the jobs strategy.

HOW IMPROVING THE FUTURE OF WORK CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** Workers will have higher employment and earnings, access to benefits, and lower material hardship.
- **Power and autonomy:** Workers will have consistent protections and a greater voice in key employment concerns, like scheduling. We also expect workers to report a greater sense of agency.
- **Being valued in community:** We expect workers of all types to report a greater sense of social inclusion and respect.

This brief summarizes the paper *Imagining a Future of Work That Fosters Mobility for All*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.