



Professional Certifications Offer Workers With No College Degree a Pathway to Good Jobs

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Introduction

AMERICANS NEED MORE PATHS TO MIDDLE-SKILLS JOBS.

Income inequality has become one of the defining challenges of the early 21st century. According to some estimates, average U.S. incomes have stagnated for the bottom 50% of working-age adults over the past few decades.¹ Meanwhile, labor force participation rates fell steadily between 2000 and 2015 among working-age adults, particularly those without a college degree.² Concerns about the vulnerability of growing numbers of contingent and “gig” workers have further heightened concerns about inequality in access to high-quality jobs. Gallup’s recent research on the quality of work in the U.S. finds that only 40% of workers are in “good jobs,” defined along various dimensions that include compensation.³

Americans with no postsecondary degree or credential have seen the biggest decline in job opportunities. A 2018 report from the Georgetown Center on Education and Workforce notes that two out of three jobs now demand at least some education or training beyond high school — a dramatic change from the post-World War II industrial economy when two out of three entry-level jobs required a high school diploma or less.⁴

Though the proportion of Americans with a college degree has been rising steadily, 2018 Census data indicate that 39% of adults aged 25 and older have no formal academic credentials beyond a high school education.⁵ Educational attainment rates reinforce inequality along racial and ethnic lines; while 50% of non-Hispanic whites aged 25 and older have no postsecondary degree, this figure rises to 64% among blacks and 74% among Hispanics.

Formal college degrees remain out of reach for many Americans, who need other ways to prepare for “middle-skills” jobs such as technical jobs in skilled-services and blue-collar industries. The availability of non-degree credentials intended to address this need has surged in recent years. However, their impact has been limited by challenges in assessing their quality and market value.

- 1 Piketty, T., Saez, E., & Zucman, G. (2017). Distributional national accounts: methods and estimates for the United States. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w22945>
- 2 Breitwieser, A., Nunn, R., & Shambaugh, J. (2018, August 2). The recent rebound in prime-age labor force participation. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/08/02/the-recent-rebound-in-prime-age-labor-force-participation/>
- 3 Rothwell, J., & Crabtree, S. (2019). Not Just a Job: New Evidence on the Quality of Work in the United States. Washington, D.C.: Gallup.
- 4 Carnevale, A. P., & Rose, S. J. (2011). The Undereducated American. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- 5 U.S. Census Bureau. Educational Attainment in the United States: 2018. Data retrieved at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/education-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html>

Findings

A HIGH SHARE OF U.S. WORKERS WITH PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS ARE IN “GOOD JOBS.”

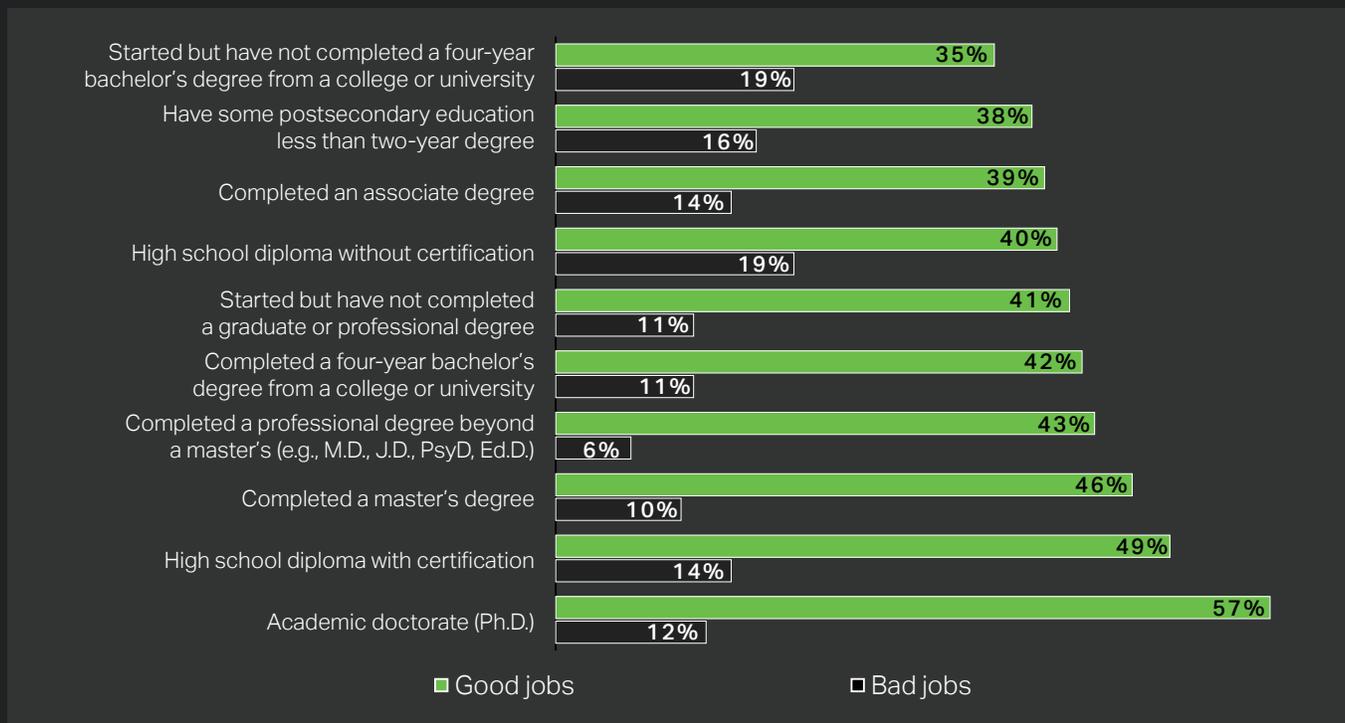
Among the most common non-degree credentials are professional certifications, which are granted by nongovernmental bodies — such as businesses or trade/industry associations — to confirm proficiency in a given field. Academic research based on Census data finds that otherwise similar workers earn consistently higher incomes if they possess a certification.⁶

Certifications can be tailored to meet precise industry needs, offering a way for employers to assess the readiness of applicants for jobs that may not require a postsecondary degree, or for which the necessary skills do not align well with formal degree structures.⁷ As discussed in Gallup’s initial **Great Jobs** report, those with a high school education and a professional certification — but no other postsecondary education — are among the workers most likely to be in a good job, at 49%. That figure is on par with the 47% of workers with a postgraduate degree who are in good jobs. Notably, high school-educated workers without a professional certification are less likely to be in good jobs, at 40%, and more likely to be in bad jobs (19%, vs. 14% for those with a certification).

About half of U.S. workers with a high school degree and professional certification are in good jobs, second only to those with Ph.D.s.

CHART 1

Percentage of U.S. workers in good and bad jobs, by highest level of education



6 Gittleman, M., Klee, M. A., & Kleiner, M. M. (2018). Analyzing the labor market outcomes of occupational licensing. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w20961>

7 The Narrow Ladder: The Value of Industry Certifications in the Job Market. (2017). Burning Glass Technologies. Retrieved from <https://www.burning-glass.com/research-project/certifications/>

However, the advantage a professional certification offers for job quality appears to be specific to workers with a high school diploma and no postsecondary education. Among workers overall (i.e., with any level of formal education), those with certifications are no more likely than those without them to be in a good job. In other words, for workers who do have some level of postsecondary education, also having a certification is not associated with any additional improvement in job quality.

HOW MANY U.S. WORKERS HAVE A PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION?

For the Great Jobs Survey, researchers identified certification holders as those who answered “yes” to either of the following questions:

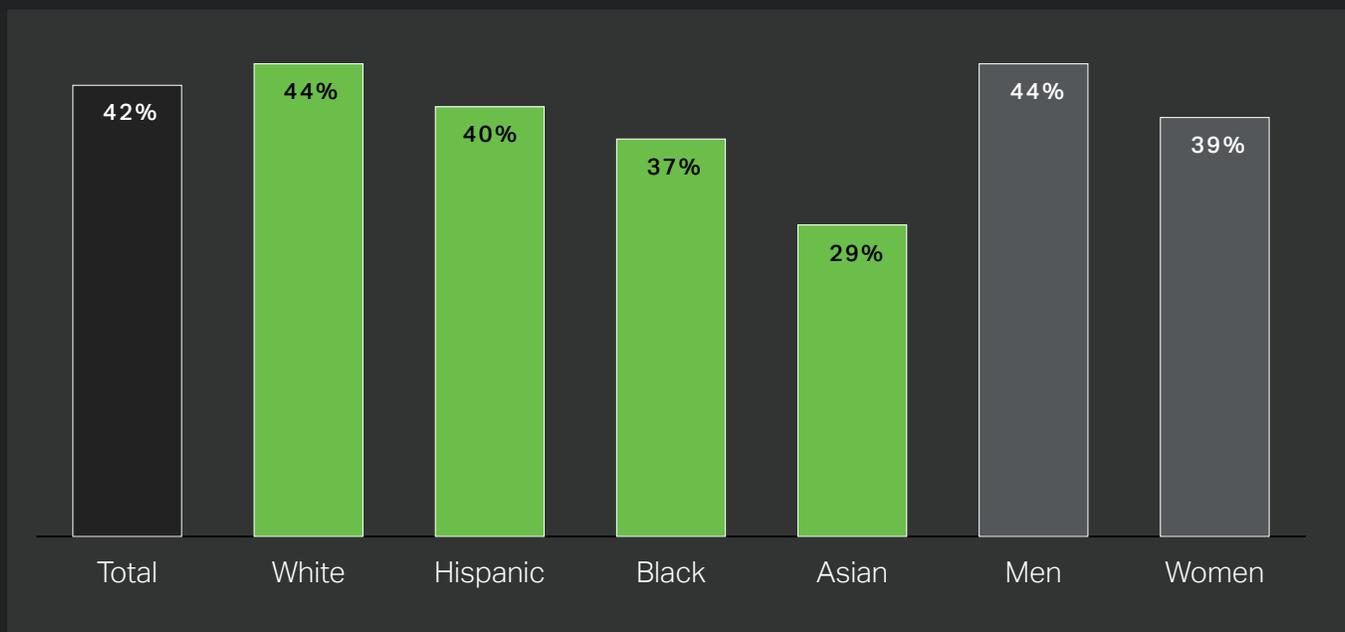
- Which of the following describes your educational experiences? Completed a technical, trade, vocational, industry, or apprenticeship certification.
- Have you obtained a professional certification? A professional certification is a credential used to demonstrate the mastery of knowledge or skill in a specific field and is commonly awarded by a trade or industry association.

According to this measure, 45% of U.S. workers say they have earned some kind of professional certification — including 42% of those without a postsecondary degree.

Importantly, professional certifications are more equitably distributed among workers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds than college degrees are. Blacks and, particularly, Hispanics are more likely than whites or Asians to have no formal degree beyond high school. Among workers with no postsecondary degree, however, Hispanics are almost as likely as white workers to have a certification — 40% versus 44%, respectively — with black workers close behind at 37%. Men and women with no postsecondary education are also similarly likely to have a certification — 44% versus 39%, respectively.

CHART 2

Percentage of U.S. workers without a postsecondary degree who have a professional certification



As with other non-degree credentials, employers' use of certifications varies widely by occupation and career field. In service industries such as healthcare, education and government services, most workers with no postsecondary education have a certification (62%). Conversely, certifications are far less prevalent among those who have jobs in manufacturing (29%) or the restaurant, entertainment or hospitality industries (18%).

Table 1: Percentage of employees with no postsecondary education who have a professional certification, by industry

| Industry type | Percentage of workers without postsecondary education who have a professional certification |
|---|---|
| Healthcare, education, nonprofit or government services | 62% |
| Finance or real estate | 53% |
| Construction, transportation, farming or energy | 42% |
| Selling goods (retail or wholesale) | 36% |
| Professional services (e.g., legal, engineering, computer programming, consulting, administrative services) | 36% |
| Manufacturing goods | 29% |
| Restaurants, entertainment or hospitality | 18% |
| Other | 28% |



Outcomes

CERTIFICATIONS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH BETTER EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND INCREASED CONFIDENCE IN CAREER PROSPECTS.

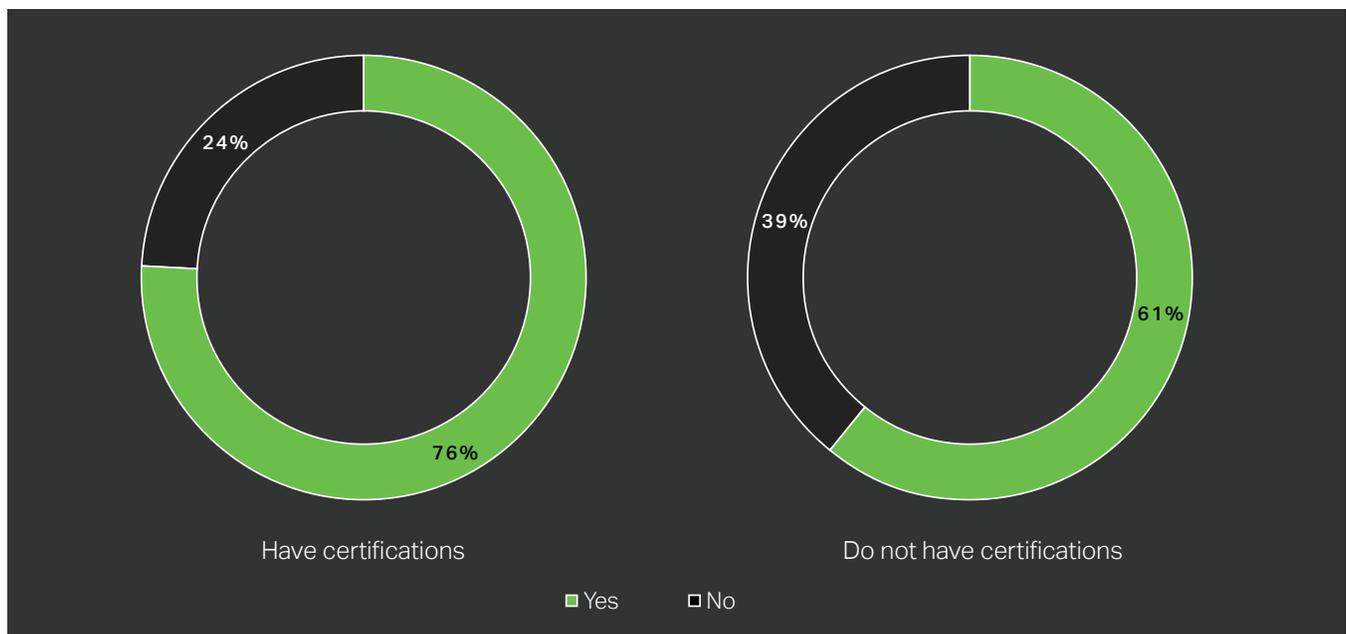
In the current study, 41% of Americans in their prime working years (age 25 to 54) with no postsecondary degree say they have a professional certification of some kind. Eighty-one percent of those who have a certification are employed, versus 68% of those without one. Conversely, 6% of those with certifications are unemployed and looking for work, as opposed to 10% among those with no certification.

Professional certifications also appear to bolster optimism about their future employment prospects among many Americans without any postsecondary education. Three-fourths of those with a professional certification (76%) feel they currently have the education or training they need for the type of job they would like to have in the next five years, versus 61% of those who have not earned a certification.

CHART 3

Do you currently have the level of education and/or training you need for the type of job you would like to have in the next five years?

(Results among employees without a postsecondary education)



Job quality

The Great Jobs Survey was used to develop a well-rounded measure of job quality using U.S. workers' ratings of their current job on 10 distinct aspects of job quality. These factors include basic concerns such as level of pay, benefits, job security and opportunities for advancement, as well as others that impact workers' quality of life, such as level of autonomy and day-to-day enjoyment of work.

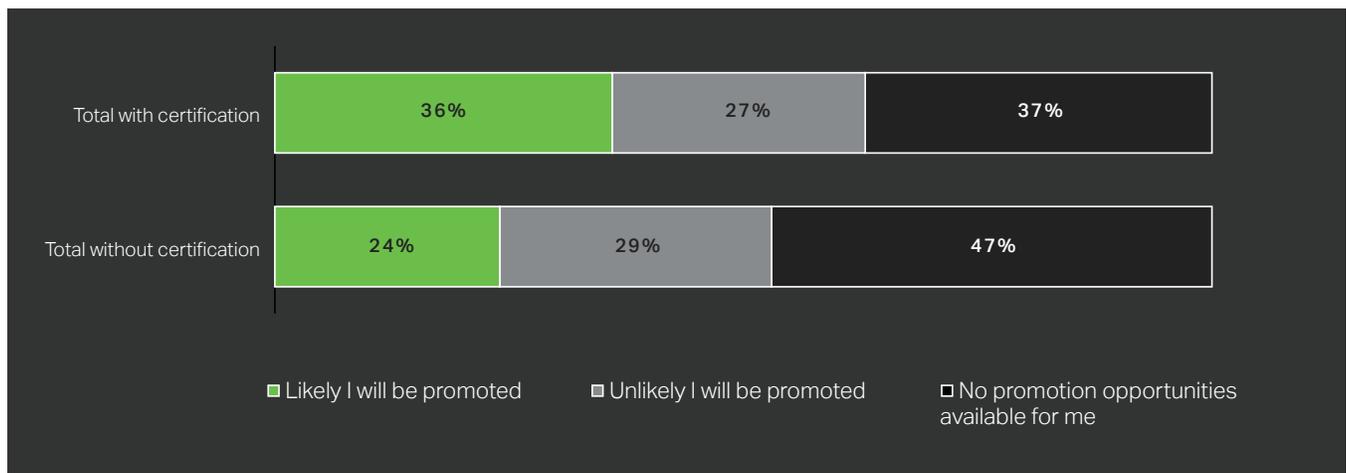
Certifications are associated with higher ratings for one attribute in particular among U.S. workers with no postsecondary education: career advancement opportunities. Fifty-two percent of those with certifications are satisfied with such opportunities in their current employment situation, versus 37% of those without a certification.

That difference is reflected in a separate question asking employees more specifically about the likelihood that they will be promoted in their current job. Among workers with no postsecondary education, 36% of those with certifications say it is likely they will be promoted in their primary job, versus 24% of those without certifications. Those without certifications are more likely to say there are no promotion opportunities available in their primary job, rather than say they personally are unlikely to be promoted.

CHART 4

Which of the following best describes your career advancement opportunities at your primary job?

(Results among employees with no postsecondary education)



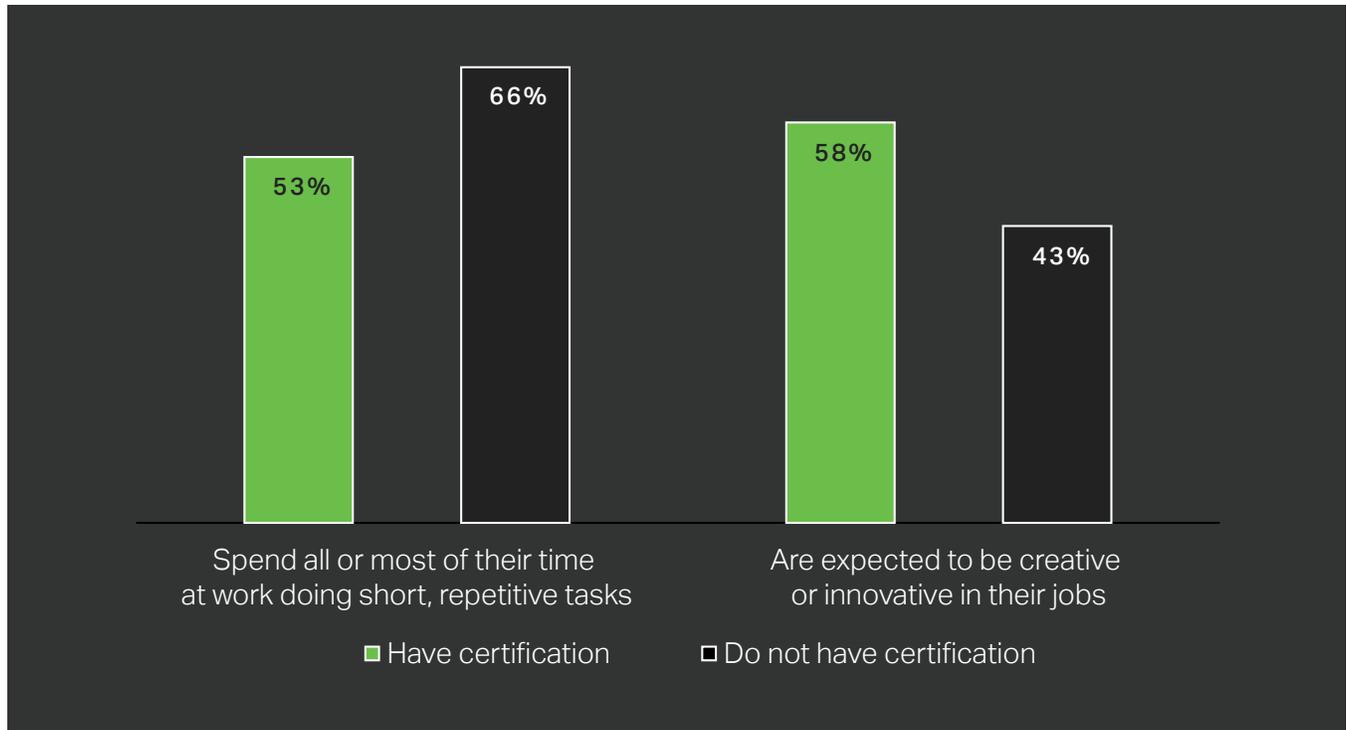
Type of work

Corresponding to the differences in job quality ratings, professional certifications are also associated with differences in the type of work employees without a college degree do. Workers who do not have certifications are more likely than those who do to say they spend most or almost all of their time on short, repetitive tasks (66% vs. 53%) — the kind that may be easiest to automate. Workers with certifications also are more likely than those without to say they are expected to be creative or innovative in their jobs — 58% versus 43%.

| *Workers with certifications are less likely to perform tasks that may be vulnerable to automation.*

CHART 5

Types of tasks performed by workers without a postsecondary education, by whether or not they have a professional certification



These results reflect the lower prevalence of professional certifications in industries with more manual-labor jobs, such as manufacturing and construction. They further support the conclusion that certifications can help workers navigate the decline in traditional blue-collar jobs⁸ by acquiring specialized skills for use in growing service sectors⁹ like healthcare and IT.

Differences in job quality and type of work help explain why, among workers with no postsecondary education, those who have professional certifications are more likely than those who do not to view their job as a career or a stepping stone to a career rather than just a means of earning money. While one-third of those with a certification (32%) say they consider their primary job to be “just a job,” this figure rises to a majority (53%) among those without a certification.

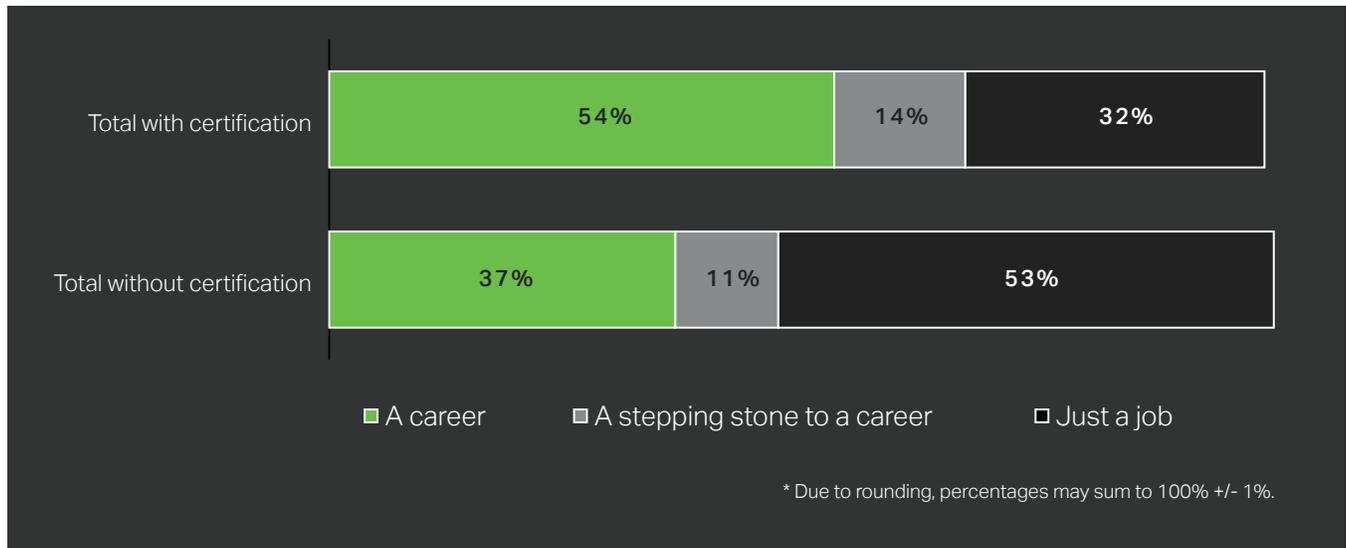
8 Carnevale, A. P., Strohl, J., Ridley, N., & Gulish, A. (2018). Educational Pathways to Good Jobs: High School, Middle Skills, and Bachelor’s Degree. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, p. 8.

9 Mutikani, L. (2019, September). U.S. services sector suggests economy weathering trade storm. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-economy/u-s-services-sector-suggests-economy-weathering-trade-storm-idUSKCN1VQ1S9>

CHART 6

Do you consider your primary job to be a career, a stepping stone or career, or just a job?

(Results among employees with no postsecondary education)



JOB-QUALITY GAINS VARY BY INDUSTRY TYPE.

The Great Jobs Survey points to significant differences by industry type in career advancement opportunities for those with professional certifications but no postsecondary education. In industries where certifications are less common, they are more strongly associated with satisfaction with career advancement. Table 2 aggregates industry types into broad categories to ensure the samples are large enough to compare results among workers with and without certifications reliably.

The results indicate that, while workers with certifications are more likely to be satisfied with their career development opportunities across industry type, the gap is smallest, at 10 percentage points, among those in healthcare, education and government services — the category in which certifications are most common (see Table 1). The largest gaps are seen in areas where fewer employees are certified, including industries with many customer-facing employees (selling goods, restaurants, hospitality, entertainment) and industries with more manual-labor jobs (manufacturing, construction, transportation, farming).

Table 2: In your current employment situation, on a five-point scale, where 5 means extremely satisfied and 1 means not at all satisfied, how satisfied are you with your career advancement opportunities?

(Percentage “satisfied” (4 or 5) among employees with no postsecondary education)

| Industry type | Have certification | Do not have certification | Difference |
|--|--------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| Selling goods (retail or wholesale), restaurants, hospitality, entertainment | 52% | 33% | 19 pts. |
| Manufacturing, construction, transportation, farming | 54% | 36% | 18 pts. |
| Professional services (e.g., legal, engineering, computer programming, consulting, finance, real estate) | 66% | 50% | 16 pts. |
| Healthcare, education, government services | 46% | 36% | 10 pts. |
| Other | 48% | 33% | 15 pts. |

Certifications are also associated with higher ratings of several other job quality characteristics in the top two industry types listed in Table 2, particularly those in the manufacturing, construction, transportation and farming group. Those with certifications are considerably more likely to be satisfied with the stability and predictability of their hours, day-to-day enjoyment at work, sense of purpose and dignity, and their ability to change things they’re not satisfied with.

Table 3: Percentage satisfied with each characteristic among employees in manufacturing, construction, transportation or farming with no postsecondary education

| | Total | Have certification | Do not have certification |
|---|-------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Stable and predictable hours | 66% | 76% | 60% |
| Enjoying your day-to-day work | 61% | 76% | 53% |
| Having a sense of purpose and dignity | 71% | 84% | 63% |
| Having the power to change things about your job that you’re not satisfied with | 44% | 59% | 36% |

These differences are smaller in the other industry groups listed in Table 2, though across most industry types, workers with certifications are significantly more likely than those without to be satisfied with their power to change things at work.

THE BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH CERTIFICATIONS VARY BY GENDER.

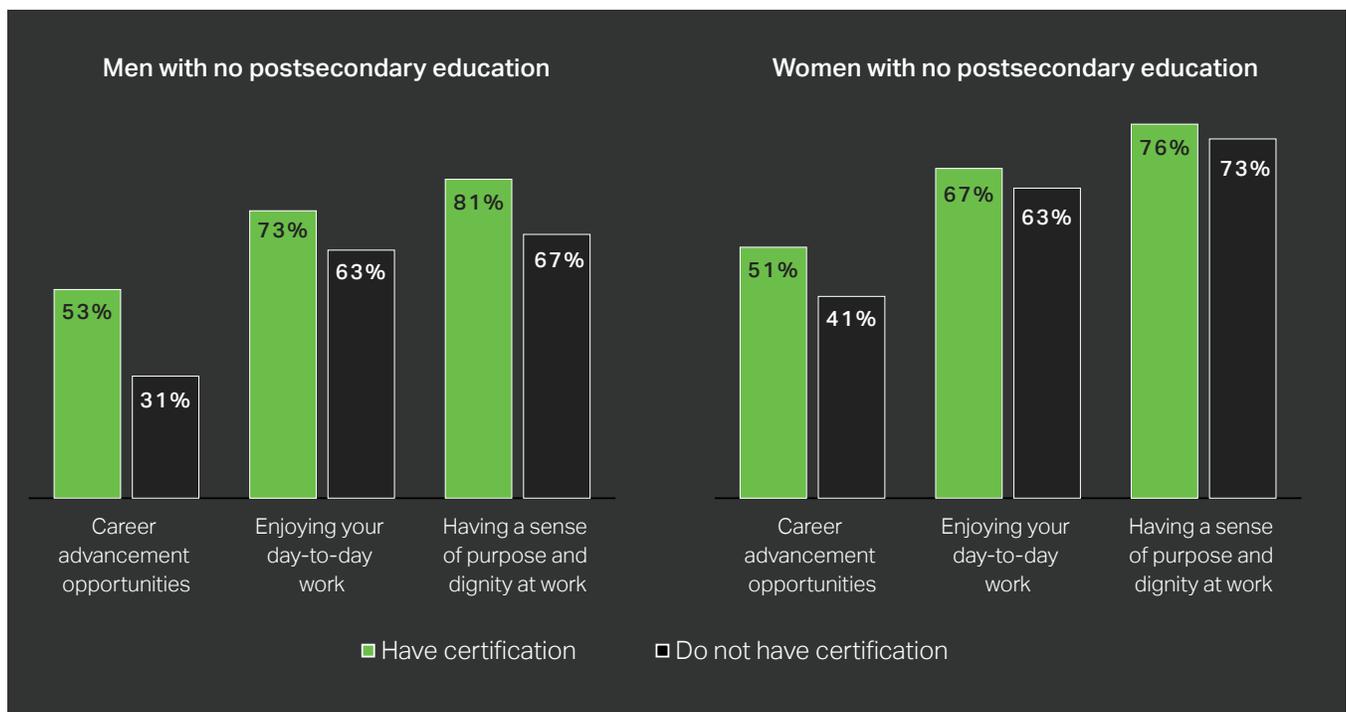
Among workers with no postsecondary education, certifications are more strongly associated with higher satisfaction on various work dimensions for men compared to women. Men with a certification are much more likely than those without one to express satisfaction with career advancement opportunities, enjoyment of work and having a sense of purpose. Among women, however, the gap in favor of those with a certification is much smaller.

These gender gaps in the apparent effect of certifications may be related to gender differences in work by industry and occupation. Great Jobs Survey data show that among workers without a college degree, 76% of those in construction, transportation, farming or energy are men, as are 65% of those in manufacturing. Women, meanwhile, comprise 58% of workers in healthcare, education and government services, and 66% in finance or real estate.

CHART 7

In your current employment situation, how satisfied are you with ...

(Percentage satisfied with each job quality characteristic)



Implications

Amidst concerns about the availability of high-quality work for Americans without a postsecondary education, this analysis finds that those with professional certifications are more likely to be in “good jobs” overall. In particular, certifications appear to make a difference in helping such workers feel their job is more than a means of earning money, but a career-oriented position that offers opportunities for advancement and growth.

The data also point to differences by industry in the extent to which these differences occur. Certifications are most common in service-sector industries such as healthcare and education, where they serve as minimum requirements for many technical and support roles. However, they are more likely to distinguish between higher- and lower-quality jobs in economic sectors where they are less common, such as manufacturing or retail sales.

These findings suggest efforts to expand the use of certifications in such fields may help provide more workers who have no postsecondary education with opportunities to work their way up from entry-level jobs to positions that offer a clear path to advancement.

Survey Methodology

Results for this study are based on mail surveys conducted February 8–April 1, 2019, with a random sample of 9,671 adults aged 18 and older living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Of the 9,671 individuals who responded to this survey, 6,633 were working adults and were included in the analysis in this report.

Gallup randomly selected individuals to participate in the study using an address-based sample (ABS) frame. Respondents had the opportunity to respond to the survey via web or mail. Surveys were conducted in English and Spanish. The final response rate to this survey was 14.5% (AAPOR 1).

Samples were weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. Demographic weighting targets are based on the 2017 American Community Survey figures for the aged 18 and older U.S. population. The data were weighted to match national demographics of age, education, gender, race, ethnicity, region, labor force participation and population density.

All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects from weighting.

- For results based on all working adults (n=6,633), the margin of sampling error is ± 1.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
- For results based on all low-income (bottom 20%) working adults (n=911), the margin of sampling error is ± 5.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
- For results based on all high-income (top 10%) working adults (n=513), the margin of sampling error is ± 7.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error and bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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