

A close-up photograph of a woman with curly brown hair, wearing a white lab coat, smiling warmly at the camera. She is holding a grey clipboard in front of her. The background is a soft-focus office or laboratory setting.

The Condition of Work Readiness in the United States

Executive Summary



About ACT

ACT is an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides a broad array of assessment, research, information, and program management solutions in the areas of education and workforce development.

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Executive Summary—The Condition of Work Readiness in the United States

The Condition of Work Readiness in the United States highlights levels of work readiness for various subgroups of an estimated 4 million ACT WorkKeys® examinees in the United States and provides ACT Work Readiness Standards and Benchmarks for targeted occupations over the next 8–10 years.

Data are presented for ACT WorkKeys examinees from 2006–2011 for three cognitive assessments: Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, and Locating Information. These three skills have been consistently identified as important for success in a broad range of jobs, making them “essential” foundational skills.

Occupational profiles in the ACT JobPro® database were used to determine work readiness benchmarks for three selected groups of targeted occupations (those projected to be in demand, growing, and high paying) and grouped into three education categories (high, middle, and low).

The report investigated the assumption that individuals with a given level of education have the requisite skills for occupations requiring that level of education. A gap analysis was conducted to compare examinees by education group for occupations requiring similar levels of education for entry into employment. “Skills gap” was defined as a gap between the skills needed for a job requiring a given level of education versus those skills possessed by workers with that level of education.

Work Readiness Trends

- For examinees who took the three cognitive ACT WorkKeys assessments between 2006 and 2011, the level of work readiness skills consistently increased with level of education.
- Among examinees with a high level of education, 90% were more likely to qualify for the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate™ at the Silver level or higher, compared to 65% of the individuals with a low level of education and 77% of those with a middle level.
- Significant foundational skills gaps exist between the skills of examinees with either a low or high level of education and the skills needed for jobs requiring a low or high level of education.

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- For high-paying target occupations requiring a low or high level of education, the majority of examinees with a low or high level of education could not demonstrate the required skill level for locating information. This skill involves the ability to locate, synthesize, and use information from workplace graphics such as charts, graphs, tables, forms, flowcharts, diagrams, floor plans, maps, and instrument gauges.
- Less than half (45%) of the examinees with a high level of education met the Locating Information skill requirements for 4 of the 5 occupations with a large number of openings and for 3 of the 5 highest-paying occupations requiring a high level of education.
- Only 19% of the examinees with a low level of education met or exceeded the Locating Information skill requirements for 4 of the 5 highest-paying occupations requiring a low level of education.

Key Observations

1. A higher level of education does not always guarantee work readiness.

For the data examined, a work readiness skills gap is apparent for individuals with high education levels when compared to target occupations requiring a high level of education. While individuals in the high-education group show greater levels of work readiness skills, the data suggest that these skills aren't always enough to meet the work readiness demands of the targeted occupations requiring a high level of education. The most apparent gaps occur in Locating Information.

2. There is no significant gap between the skills needed for middle level education jobs and the skills possessed by middle level education examinees.

This finding suggests that, for the targeted occupations examined, middle education aligns with the work readiness requirements. Further research is needed to understand differences in the quality versus the quantity of workers needed for jobs requiring some level of education and training post-high school.

3. Education level is not always aligned with work readiness levels.

The findings support the position of the ACT report *A Better Measure of Skills Gaps*: that caution should be used in considering indirect measures of skills as a substitute for actual skill levels. While the data examined in this report show higher work readiness skills for US examinees as their education level increases, significant skills gaps are apparent between the skills possessed by examinees with either a low or high level of education and the skills needed for targeted occupations requiring a low or high level of education. This implies that the required education level for these occupations does not fully equip individuals with the work readiness skills those jobs demand.