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BUSINESS

Want to Get Ahead? Pick the Right Company

The best places to advance your career, get groomed for bigger opportunities elsewhere and find job stability, as determined by a new study. A college degree isn't necessarily required.

By *Lauren Weber* [Follow](#) and *Theo Francis* [Follow](#) | Photographs by *Diana King and Narayan Mahon* for *The Wall Street Journal*

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Retail workers at Gap Inc. **GPS 3.25%** ▲ are significantly more likely to become managers than at other companies in their industry. Apple Inc. is among the best places to work if you want to land a bigger job elsewhere. For employees seeking security, few companies offer better job stability than Exxon **XOM 3.49%** ▲ Mobil Corp.

These are among the findings of a new five-year analysis of career mobility for millions of U.S. workers led by Philadelphia think tank Burning Glass Institute, focusing on jobs that don't necessarily require a college degree. Certain companies, it turns out, excel at helping workers in these jobs move up the career and pay ladder. At other firms careers can stagnate, even within the same industry. New skills at those firms don't always translate into promotions, higher wages or more opportunities to advance.

Getting ahead, the study concludes, is largely a matter of picking the right company. Tracking which companies provide more mobility could be critical for workers as the labor market loosens, companies slow hiring and the future of the U.S. economy becomes more uncertain. A weaker labor market means fewer options for workers, making initial career choices that much more important. Employers could develop a hiring advantage if they can demonstrate the ability to identify and advance new recruits, especially Americans without college degrees who have the skills for higher-wage work.

The release of these findings follows an examination of workers at more than 200 of the biggest U.S. companies conducted by Burning Glass Institute, a nonprofit launched earlier this year to research employment trends, along with the Harvard Project on Managing the Future of Work and the Schultz Family Foundation, the philanthropy started by longtime Starbucks Corp. leader Howard Schultz. It was their first attempt at such a study, using data

from the Labor Department and self-reported data available from LinkedIn, Glassdoor and other online sources during the period from 2017 to 2021.

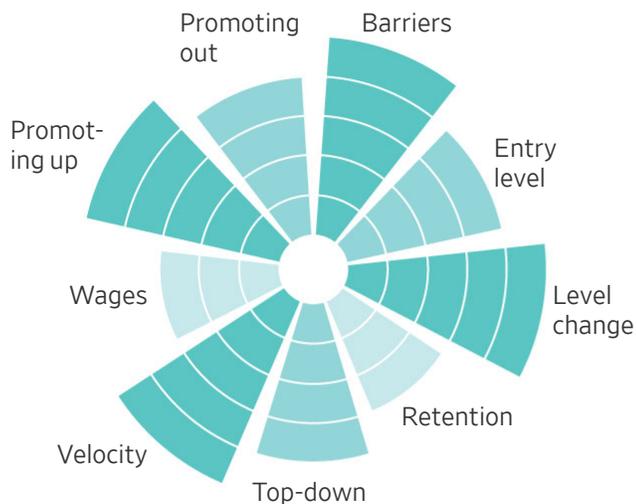
Top 10 companies for economic and job opportunity

With quintile grouping within each category

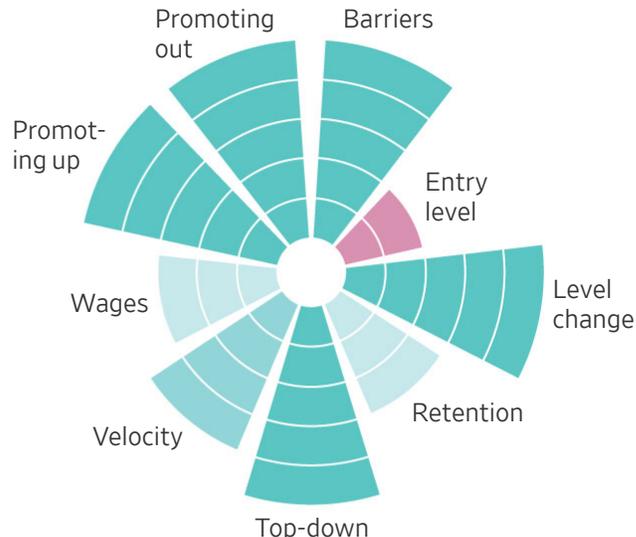


AT&T and American Express scored the highest in the overall rankings. Both were in the top quintile in 'barriers,' indicating they were more likely to hire workers without a bachelor's degree.

1. AT&T



2. AMERICAN EXPRESS



Barriers: hires workers without bachelor's degree

Entry level: hires inexperienced workers

Level change: promotes workers

Retention: retains workers for five years or more

Top-down: fills top jobs from within

Velocity: time it takes for workers to advance one level in company

Wages: competitive wages within each occupation

Promoting up: fills openings through internal promotions

Promoting out: workers go to higher-level jobs upon leaving company

3. CISCO SYSTEMS



4. PG&E



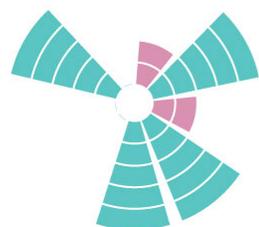
5. MICROSOFT



6. FISERV



7. HF SINCLAIR



8. LIBERTY MUTUAL INSURANCE



9. INTERNATIONAL PAPER



10. SOUTHWEST AIRLINES



Note: Based on a five-year analysis of online profiles and other data sources for workers at more than 200 of the largest U.S. companies. HF Sinclair data not available for some categories.

Source: Burning Glass Institute and the Harvard Project on Managing the Future of Work
Peter Santilli/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Burning Glass and its partners assigned scores to nine categories, such as how many promotions employees received and the average time it took to move up one job level. The goal was to identify which employers were best at helping their workers advance professionally and economically, particularly those who may not have a college degree. The authors said the study has limits because LinkedIn and other data sources don't capture every employee, but they said those limitations don't benefit certain companies over others.

“Where you work turns out to be one of those decisions that really has big consequences, but the problem is that workers don't have the visibility to make an informed choice,” said Burning Glass Institute President Matt Sigelman, who founded the employment research organization after years of running a labor-market analytics firm now called Lightcast, which primarily sells data to employers, government agencies and universities. “Whether you wind up at a company that's an escalator for mobility or a treadmill,” he added, “for a lot of workers it's a crapshoot.”

The companies that provided the most mobility, according to the study, were among the most familiar names in corporate America. Telecommunications giant AT&T Inc., credit-card networker American Express Co. and network-equipment maker Cisco Systems Inc. had the three highest composite scores in what Burning Glass calls the American Opportunity Index, with utility PG&E Corp. and Microsoft Corp. rounding out the top five. All, even the top performers, showed areas where they could improve.

At AT&T, there are tens of thousands of installers, retail-store clerks and other front-line workers among its more than 172,000 employees, said Angela Santone, AT&T's senior executive vice president for human resources, and fewer than 5% of job openings require college degrees. The company trains new hires in many roles, and top managers often are recruited from company ranks. That includes Chief Executive John Stankey, who does have a college degree and started at the company more than three decades ago taking customer requests for phone service.

“You can come in and become a tech on the front line, you can work in a retail store, and you can work in a call center,” Ms. Santone said. “We're very much about bringing individuals in and then training them.”

The companies that did well in Burning Glass's analysis typically generated opportunities for workers in certain ways. Three common corporate profiles as defined by Burning Glass were companies that provided employees with the ability to ascend within their ranks; companies that served as a launchpad to outside opportunities; or companies that provided job stability.

Here is a closer look at some firms that fit those descriptions, as ranked by Burning Glass.

Companies that advance workers from within

Measuring mobility is important because companies tend to focus more on filling immediate needs than identifying people with the skills to move beyond that initial job, according to Burning Glass.

When people from four-year universities are hired into entry-level sales, technical or management jobs “you’ll be trained for advancement,” said Byron Auguste, chief executive and co-founder of Opportunity@Work, a nonprofit organization that focuses on increasing economic mobility for people without college degrees. But for people emerging from high school, community college programs or other forms of training, “you most likely will be in an entry-level retail, warehouse, or factory floor job, and you’re trained for safety, compliance and efficiency, and not for advancement.”

But some companies studied by Burning Glass provided a path forward. To gauge which large companies offered the most opportunity for advancement to new or inexperienced hires, Burning Glass looked at several factors. It examined the share of hires over time that arrive with little to no work experience, the number of promotions to better-paying jobs that workers experienced over the course of the study, and how quickly a worker at the company rose one level.

One industry that did well in this specific assessment of “best workplaces to advance within” was retail, which absorbs millions of inexperienced and new workers with entry-level associate and cashier jobs. Gap, Nordstrom Inc. and Macy's Inc. are among the retailers that scored highly. Verizon Communications Inc. and AT&T, both telecommunications firms with large retail operations, also did well.

Two direct retail competitors—discount chains Dollar General Corp. and Dollar Tree Inc.—fared DLTR **1.30%** ▲ differently. Dollar General, a company with more than 18,000 stores in the U.S., did better in a measure of how many promotions a typical employee received in the

five-year period of the analysis, making it one of the top companies providing opportunities for workers to grow.

The Top 50 Companies for Getting Ahead

A new study ranked more than 200 of the largest U.S. companies by economic and job opportunity, using a range of criteria. Here are the 50 top performers overall, with their quintile scores in each of nine subcategories. Five is the top quintile score, one is the lowest.

RANK	EMPLOYER	INDUSTRY	BARRIERS	ENTRY LEVEL	LEVEL CHANGE	RETENTION	TOP-DOWN	VE
1	AT&T	Telecommunications	5	4	5	3	4	
2	American Express	Payments	5	2	5	3	5	
3	Cisco Systems	Technology manufacturing	3	2	5	4	4	
4	PG&E	Utilities	4	4	3	4	4	
5	Microsoft	Technology	5	1	5	4	4	
6	Fiserv	Business services	5	4	5	5	3	
7	HF Sinclair	Oil, gas and mining	2	5	2	5	5	
8	Liberty Mutual Insurance	Insurance carriers and related	4	5	1	2	5	
9	International Paper	Materials and chemicals manufacturing	4	3	3	5	5	
10	Southwest Airlines	Transportation	4	3	4	5	4	

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10 ▼ entries per page

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Top-down: fills top jobs from within

Velocity: time it takes for workers to advance one level in company

Wages: competitive wages within each occupation

Promoting up: fills openings through internal promotions

Promoting out: workers go to higher-level jobs upon leaving company

Note: Based on a five-year analysis of online profiles and other data sources for workers at more than 200 of the largest U.S. companies. A subcategory score of five reflects the top quintile, one is the lowest. Data not available for cells without a quintile score.

Source: Burning Glass Institute and the Harvard Project on Managing the Future of Work

Dollar Tree didn't make that list, but it made another: which companies offered the most opportunity to people without college degrees.

Dollar Tree spokesman Randy Guiler said the company provides financial support for education, including tuition discounts and reimbursement allowances for full-time associates, along with a range of development opportunities. He said the executive team, which has new leaders in place across many functions, is focused on changing the company's culture and better supporting its workers.

One former worker, Ashley O'Neal, said she was never encouraged to apply for openings. She was a store manager at a Dollar Tree in Virginia until leaving in 2018. During her employment, she said, she didn't receive training on how to improve her management skills or run the store more effectively. Mr. Guiler declined to comment on Ms. O'Neal's experience.

At Dollar General, employees move up frequently and quickly in part due to the pace of store openings, said Kathy Reardon, the retailer's chief people officer. The company has in recent years filled more than 2,000 new manager and assistant manager positions annually.

It mostly plucks from its existing workforce. Around 75% of Dollar General's store managers were internal promotions or lateral moves, she said. Chief Operating Officer Jeff Owen, who will take over the chief executive role on Nov. 1, started at the company in 1992 as a store manager trainee.

On average, a part-time sales associate can be promoted to lead associate within six months, then to assistant manager within one year and to store manager within three years. Dollar General also provides training for every upward move.



Donna Hernandez, left, was a 19-year-old waitress with a high school diploma when she was offered a job at Dollar General. Now she is a divisional vice president of store operations. Here she looks over the seasonal products at a Dollar General in Old Hickory, Tenn.

PHOTO: DIANA KING FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Donna Hernandez was a 19-year-old waitress with a high school diploma when she was offered a job as a part-time associate at a Dollar General in Bridgeport, Tex., in 1998. Within a year, she was managing the store. Today she is a divisional vice president of store operations, overseeing around 2,400 locations in Tennessee, Kentucky and neighboring states.

“I’m living proof you can start at sales associate and go down the path you want to,” said Ms. Hernandez, now 43. “All the resources are right here, the training and development, the mentorship.”

Not all of Dollar General’s rankings were high. Like most retailers in the Fortune 250, Dollar General was in the lowest quintile for retention. Ms. Reardon declined to share the turnover rate for store jobs, but said it is improving.

Companies that serve as a ‘launchpad’

Some companies were springboards to better jobs elsewhere. These “launchpad” companies, as Burning Glass defines them, tended to hire more entry-level employees and see departing employees land jobs in better-paying occupations at other companies, Burning Glass found.

At AT&T, which ranked among the top 50 launchpad companies, entry-level workers often gain skills they can take to other telecommunications, cable, retail or customer-service companies, said Ms. Santone, the human-resources executive.

“I personally think that’s a compliment to this company,” she added. “At the end of the day, I want them here, but I don’t look at all turnover as bad.”



Customers at an AT&T store in Surfside, Florida, in 2021. Companies with retail operations ranked highly as launchpad for opportunities elsewhere.

PHOTO: JEFFREY GREENBERG/UCG/GETTY IMAGES

Other top-50 launchpad companies included insurers, steel producers, electronics wholesalers, auto-parts sellers and a half-dozen tech giants. Apple and Cisco scored relatively low when it came to hiring entry-level workers, but were better at sending employees on to bigger jobs elsewhere.

An Apple spokesman questioned whether online data would accurately represent career changes of Apple’s employees but declined to comment on the study’s conclusions. A Cisco spokeswoman said the company sponsors a branded networking-technology training program, aimed at underserved communities, that has enrolled 17.5 million students globally. “By focusing on skills, not just degrees, we hope to broaden economic opportunity and upward mobility,” she said.

Drugstore chains ranked high in large part because of the sheer volume of entry-level workers they tend to hire. CVS Health Corp. also stood out for its record of sending those workers on to better jobs elsewhere.

Some current and former CVS employees say the data aligns with their experience. Reliable retail workers can be catapulted into roles with bigger responsibilities, becoming assistant managers or managers, relatively quickly, they say. Often, they can do the same by jumping to another company, since the skills tend to be readily transferable.

Behind the pharmacy counter, something similar plays out with pharmacy technicians, who assist the pharmacist by counting pills, working the register, answering the phone, entering account details and more.

Many states impose few job requirements on new pharmacy techs. On their feet all day, they field customers who may be ill or unhappy, and in some states they administer vaccines. They often are trained on the job—when there is time, said Amanda Schiefelbein, a pharmacy technician at a CVS outside Madison, Wis.

“A lot of pharmacies are so short-staffed, many people are working 40-plus hours a week,” said Ms. Schiefelbein, who has been a pharmacy tech for five years, including in supermarket pharmacies.



Amanda Schiefelbein, who works for CVS, said she has seen co-workers go on to become nurses or take other healthcare jobs. ‘I think it’s a good place for anyone going into the medical field.’

PHOTO: NARAYAN MAHON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Demand for techs is high, and so is turnover. A competing drugstore chain might pay a little more. Jobs with similar titles at a hospital or oncology-clinic pharmacy might look lateral on paper, but offer a more appealing quality of life, Ms. Shiefelbein said.

She said she has seen some co-workers go on to become nurses or take other healthcare jobs. “I think it’s a good place for anyone going into the medical field,” she said.

T.J. Crawford, a CVS spokesman, said the chain has added new growth opportunities for pharmacy techs, including an apprenticeship program for careers in retail pharmacy and management. He said CVS is also updating its training programs, staffing models, and pharmacy technology.

Companies that provide stability

There are other companies that stand out for job stability, a combination of retention and wages. That trait could look more desirable for workers if the U.S. enters a recession and hiring slows.

Several industries have many companies that fit this profile as defined by Burning Glass, including oil, gas and mining, technology, technology manufacturing, and aerospace and defense. Outside of those sectors, a few standouts were telecom Lumen Technologies Inc., pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly & Co. and lender Freddie Mac.

Despite the boom-and-bust nature of the oil-and-gas industry, eight companies in the Fortune 250 show up in the top quintile for job stability—particularly those that operate refineries or pipelines or pump natural gas.

The industry is known for paying well, said Amanda Rico, a Houston-based career consultant who works exclusively with people from the sector. That is one reason why industries outside of oil and gas tend to not like hiring oil and gas professionals, Ms. Rico said. “Because they know they’ll go running back to oil and gas when the business comes back,” she said.

Among the leading companies in the job-stability index is Exxon Mobil Corp. A likely reason for its strong showing in retention is that until 2020, the company had never announced a large-scale layoff. In October that year, Exxon said it would cut 15% of its global workforce, including about 1,900 jobs in the U.S., amid a pandemic-driven downturn in demand for oil and gas.



Exxon Mobil scored well in the area of job stability. Pictured is an Exxon Mobil gas station in El Cerrito, Calif.

PHOTO: DAVID PAUL MORRIS/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Generally, Exxon has preferred to retain people, especially its high performers, through high salaries that Ms. Rico described as “golden handcuffs.” The company said it culls its workforce through an annual performance review and forced ranking process, in which low performers are put on improvement plans and terminated if they don’t meet predetermined goals.

Average tenure for Exxon employees is more than 30 years, according to company spokesman Casey Norton, who added that even within a high-paying industry, the company’s compensation package “is at the high end for many of our employees when we compare to our peers.”

Burning Glass Institute and the Harvard Project on Managing the Future of Work used millions of online profiles and other data sources to analyze how workers at companies in the Fortune 250 fared from 2017 to 2021. It assigned scores to nine measures—such as how many promotions employees received and the average time it took to move up one job level—to arrive at an overall score. It also grouped the companies into a series of archetypes using certain combinations of the nine measures. Eight companies were left off the final ranking because sufficient data wasn’t available to evaluate them.

Researchers used Labor Department data to consider only occupations in which at least 30% of workers nationally lack a college degree to better identify companies that help the employees who need it most. So they examined the career trajectories of, for example, retail store managers, customer service representatives and web developers, but not lawyers or

software engineers. They compared people across companies who are in the same occupations; administrative assistants at Microsoft were compared with administrative assistants at Southwest Airlines and Walmart, for example.

It is the group's first attempt at such a study and it had some limits, according to its authors. Online data doesn't capture every employee, and likely skews more toward some jobs than others. College-educated workers are more likely to maintain online profiles than those with a high school education or less. So the authors created thresholds in determining which companies and occupations to include, and said the limitations applied more or less equally across the Fortune 250.

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