



Why your skills matter as much as your degree, and why that's good for you and employers

HERE'S WHY A RENEWED FOCUS ON SKILLS, AND NOT JUST ON A GENERIC FOUR-YEAR DEGREE, COULD OPEN UP THE U.S. LABOR MARKET.

[David D. Haynes](#), *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Jacobo Hernandez has a dream: Build a company to solve a persistent problem in the music business — how to make sure you get credit for your work.

That probably will mean linking up virtually all the people who contribute to a piece of music. The self-taught guitarist (jazz, blues and flamenco) and mostly self-taught computer coder wants to be the person who figures out how to do it.

And now, Hernandez can see his dream a bit more clearly. He's moving up the skills ladder by refining his coding skills through a program at UMOS, a south side community nonprofit.

[TechHire](#), which helped make possible the program Hernandez is enrolled in, is in its second year in the Milwaukee area. The training is funded by three separate Labor Department grants of about \$4 million each. Like counterparts operated by Employ Milwaukee and Waukesha-Ozaukee-Washington Workforce Development Inc., the UMOS program helps people like Hernandez get skills to start them on a career path.





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Hernandez, 25, said the web development course he is finishing up helps him see what the next opportunity might be. "There is a roadmap," he said.

And that roadmap is different from the traditional high school diploma-college degree combination that has become a baseline requirement for many careers — too many, according to some employment experts.

TechHire is part of an emerging school of thought that places more emphasis on a person's skills than on their degrees or other credentials. Among the biggest proponents is [Skillful](#), which incubated the idea in Colorado over the past two years and is expanding to other states including Wisconsin. Degrees still matter — and should — but when they become virtually a generic requirement, it leaves some people on the sidelines who could have the skill set to be in the game.

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By focusing on skills and de-emphasizing four-year degrees in jobs that don't actually need them, both potential workers and employers have more options. In a tightening labor market where companies are scrambling to fill openings, that matters.

After graduating from Greendale High School, Hernandez got an associate's degree in medical technology and found work, but he wasn't happy with his path. Then an aunt, knowing his interest in





technology, suggested he check out the UMOS program. He feels like he's on track again.

“I’ve been studying web development independently for a couple of years,” he said, “and this has really helped me master my skills.”

Here are a few things to know about TechHire, Skillful and why moving toward a skills-based model could be a welcome change for employers and employees alike:

Why are employers focusing more on skills?

As labor markets tighten, employers are looking for every good candidate they can find, particularly in certain technical fields. During the recession and the years since then, businesses were very selective in hiring, probably overly so in some cases. [As a Harvard Business School report noted last year](#), “degree inflation” — demanding a four-year degree for jobs that previously hadn’t required one — had been “making the U.S. labor market more inefficient” because perfectly capable people were overlooked or didn't bother to apply.

Katy Hamilton, a director at the Markle Foundation, a founding partner of Skillful, which is evangelizing for a skills-based labor market, said “using a degree as a proxy is screening out capable candidates.”

One example from Wisconsin: Sales representatives in wholesale and manufacturing were the fourth-most in-demand job, by number of job postings, she said. Sixty-nine percent of those postings required a bachelor’s degree, but only 46% of current



sales reps have a bachelor's now. Given that, is a four-year degree really necessary? Maybe not.



Betsy DeVos: "We need to start treating students as individuals ... not boxing them in."

(Photo: SAUL LOEB, AFP/Getty Images)

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is pushing to recognize a range of paths to becoming a “qualified worker.” [As The Atlantic reported](#), she told members of the White House Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion last November, “We need to stop forcing kids into believing a traditional four-year degree is the only pathway to success. We need to start treating students as individuals ... not boxing them in.”

But employers have to be involved early on in the process, said [Earl Buford, president and chief executive of Employ Milwaukee](#), the county’s workforce development board. “It’s essential. It’s a recipe for disaster if you don’t recognize the demand for labor, and a recipe for a lot of disappointment.”

What’s TechHire and how do I sign up?

TechHire is [a network of communities, educators and employers](#) launched by former President Barack Obama in 2015 to blaze more trails into the workplace for underrepresented Americans. Now operated by Opportunity@work, a nonprofit social enterprise based in Washington, D.C., TechHire is in 72 communities, states and rural





regions and has three grant programs operating in the Milwaukee region:

- UMOS — Contact Malorie Huguet, TechHire career coach, (414) 588-4522; malorie.huguet@umos.org. UMOS has trained about 100 people so far in areas such as web development, medical help desk and Microsoft certifications.
- Waukesha-Ozaukee-Washington Workforce Development Inc. — Contact Jessie Johnson at jjohnson235@wctc.edu or (262) 695-7882. The WOW group has trained 100 people since January 2017, with a focus on information technology, health care and manufacturing.
- Employ Milwaukee — Contact Cindy Anderson, manager, Compete Midwest, Milwaukee: Cindy.Anderson@employmilwaukee.org or (414) 270-1784. Employ Milwaukee has trained about 120 people so far in basic tech skills, some of whom got technical jobs in retail while others are getting further training. It has a partnership with Milwaukee Public Schools and Milwaukee Area Technical College. It partnered with programs in St. Louis and Cincinnati as part of its TechHire grant, Buford said.

What is Skillful?

Skillful is a collaboration launched in March 2016 between the New York-based Markle Foundation and Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper that aims to transform the U.S. labor market to a skills-based model, allowing workers to show they have the skills to do a job or, if they don't, to figure out how to go get them.



In February, Skillful announced an expansion to 20 states, including Wisconsin. The states that are a part of the [Skillful State Network](#) have committed to sharing best practices and innovations in workforce development.



Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper: His administration partnered with the Markle Foundation to get Skillful off the ground.

(Photo: State of Colorado)

“Skillful is ... trying to shift to a labor market that is based on skills where individuals are able to demonstrate their ability to do a job more transparently and employers are able to deepen their potential talent pools to identify candidates,” Hamilton said.

A persistent problem is that employers sometimes have traditional views about hiring. Job descriptions are filled with unnecessary requirements, which makes for a shallower talent pool. That’s thinking that the workforce development effort spearheaded by Skillful wants to change.

The state network of both Republican and Democratic governors aims to share best practices in workforce development and find new pathways to good jobs for people without college degrees. In Colorado, that has meant a constant emphasis on skills and sharing up-to-date information on jobs and the skills they require. Markle has worked with Microsoft, LinkedIn and a host of local partners.





One key element: career coaches. They are the teachers and mentors in high schools, community colleges and nonprofit groups who can help people make sound career decisions. The belief: Better coaching makes for smarter career decisions. Along with the governor’s office, Skillful has created a leadership program for a small group of “superstar coaches,” who will then help train others.

I’m a college student about to get a degree. Why should I care about a skills-based approach?

It’s always good to assess your raw skills or work with a counselor who can help you do that. If you’re falling short — or if a year from now you aren’t satisfied with your first job or don’t have a job — short-term skills-based training can help fill gaps.

And, note to your future self: The “fourth industrial revolution” (artificial intelligence, machine learning, nanotechnology, biotechnology) will upend labor markets in the coming years, according to a 2016 report [by the World Economic Forum](#). That means nearly everyone will need to pay attention to their skill sets, making lifelong learning a necessity.

What about people without four-year degrees?

About two-thirds of Americans don’t have a four-year degree. Short-term training can help them reskill quickly, especially for so-called middle-skill jobs, and can get them launched on a path to further training.





Earl Buford: "We tell them, this industry is going to keep growing, why don't you grow with it?"

(Photo: Employ Milwaukee)

Buford, who is leaving in late June to run a workforce agency in Pittsburgh, said Employ Milwaukee is working with MPS and MATC to help students get short-term training that can either lead to jobs immediately or more schooling — or both.

"We tell them, this industry is going to keep growing, why don't you grow with it?" Buford said. "All these programs are a response to demand that is growing. We want to make sure these kids, these young adults, have a chance to launch themselves into the market."

You mentioned middle-skill jobs? What's that?

That's a job that may need some training beyond high school [but not a four-year degree](#). Think: tool-and-die maker or machine operator, computer programmer, retail supervisor or web designer.

What's the outlook for middle-skill jobs?

Demand remains strong for these kinds of jobs, [according to the National Skills Coalition](#), an advocacy group in Washington, D.C. The group predicts that roughly half of job openings in Wisconsin will be middle-skill jobs over the next few years. But as a [Harvard study noted](#), there long has been a mismatch between the jobs



that are open and the qualified people available to fill those jobs. Foxconn, which is building a mega-factory in Racine County to make flat-panel displays, [will likely need hundreds of workers](#) who have a high school diploma and entry-level skills along with workers who have a higher skill set.



Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker: Walker has invested more in workforce development in recent years.

(Photo: J. Scott Applewhite, Associated Press)

What else is happening in Wisconsin to train workers?

Here are a few highlights: Over the last four years, the administration of Gov. Scott Walker has allocated more than \$200 million for workforce development and is budgeting another \$140 million in the current budget, according to John Dipko, spokesman for the state Department of Workforce Development. In the 2017-'18 school year, the state is budgeting \$3.9 million for its [Youth Apprenticeship program](#), which will expose about 4,000 high school students to career paths in their own communities. Last



year, the Wisconsin Registered Apprenticeship program had about 11,000 apprentices working at more than 2,000 businesses, Dipko noted. In addition, the state's Wisconsin [Fast Forward](#) grant program has awarded \$20 million so far to support 200 worker training projects.

But what about Jacobo's business idea?

Sorry, but that would be giving away his intellectual property. But don't bet against him. He and his girlfriend (she's a graphic designer) have already started a small business that aims to connect teachers or tutors with students. Think Uber for education. And he'd like to give back to future tech students, like some of his mentors have given back to him.

"What I would love to do is take my experience and basically become a resource for future students," he said.

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How I reported this article

Interviewed:

Jacobo Hernandez, a student in the TechHire program at UMOS.

Katy Hamilton, director, Markle Foundation, which is a founding partner of the Skillful initiative in Colorado and is expanding to 19 others states including Wisconsin.

Joni Theobald, UMOS TechHire director; Roderick A. Ritcherson, spokesman, UMOS, 2701 S. Chase Ave., Milwaukee.



Earl Buford, president and chief executive officer, Employ
Milwaukee.

Received information by email from John Dipko, spokesman for
the state Department of Workforce Development, and Laura
Catherman, president, Waukesha-Ozaukee-Washington
Workforce Development Inc.

Reviewed:

The Future of Jobs, [World Economic Forum](#), 2016.

[Wisconsin's Forgotten Middle](#), National Skills Coalition, 2017.

[Bridge the Gap: Rebuilding America's Middle Skills](#), Accenture,
Harvard Business School, Burning Glass

[Dismissed By Degrees](#), Accenture, Grads of Life, Harvard
Business School, 2017.

Numerous news articles on the subject including "Employers are
looking for job candidates in the wrong places," Lolade Fadulu
, [The Atlantic](#), Dec. 25, 2017, and "A new kind of tech job
emphasizes skills, not a college degree," Steve Lohr, [The New
York Times](#), June 28, 2017.

