

WORKFORCE **NARRATIVE PROJECT**

**Review of How the Media Covers Job Training and
Workforce Development Issues from April 2005 to October 2007**

Communications Consortium Media Center

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**Prepared by the Communications Consortium Media Center
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The Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) and its Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work set out to examine how the media looked at job training and workforce development issues. This paper is a review of how 10 leading U.S. newspapers covered these issues from April 2005 to October 2007.

The purpose of the review was to establish coverage patterns of these issues, the framing the media used to describe these issues, ways in which events and reports affect coverage, determine who was quoted in these articles and who was not, and both the quality and quantity of coverage.

Methodology

CCMC reviewed 200 randomly selected articles from 10 leading newspapers. These newspapers were chosen either because of their large circulation, their regional importance or because they are influential papers whose coverage is reviewed by other media outlets. Each article was 500 or more words in length. The review only looked at feature articles. Mundane articles like ribbon-cutting ceremonies, job placements, and retirements were excluded. Also excluded were editorials, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor.

The 10 papers selected for review were Atlanta Journal & Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, New York Times, Rocky Mountain News, USA Today, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post. Because many of these papers have extensive resources, the electronic media use these newspapers for story ideas of their own. Thus, the findings in this 10-paper review can be applied across all U.S. media—both newspapers and electronic media.

Because the major weekly newsmagazines also have some influence on the U.S. media, this analysis also looked at all articles written between April 2005 and October 2007 on job training and workforce development issues by Business Week, Newsweek and Time Magazine. There were just a dozen articles that focused on some aspect of these issues.

Eight search phrases were chosen with the help of The Working Poor Families Project. The search terms were: community college training, job

training, occupational training, skills development, skill shortage, skills training, training, and workforce development.

Then an electronic database was used to retrieve the articles. More than 3,000 newspaper articles were found during this time period and 200 were selected on a random basis. Each article was read and analyzed by CCMC.

Newspapers: How They Stack Up

The Chicago Tribune lead coverage of these issues in numerical terms while USA Today was the least likely to cover these issues. Here's how newspaper coverage of the papers reviewed broke down:

Atlanta Journal & Constitution – 36
Chicago Tribune – 39
Christian Science Monitor – 18
Los Angeles Times – 23
Philadelphia Inquirer – 17
New York Times – 13
Rocky Mountain News – 21
USA Today – 4
Wall Street Journal – 7
Washington Post – 19

Also, by subjective judgment, coverage of the issues by the Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times was the best informed on the issues while USA Today was the least informed.

Both the Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times carried articles that offered the most comprehensive view of workforce development and job training issues. The papers carried numerous stories about how a contracting economy (Chicago) or an expanding economy (Atlanta) dealt with these issues. Coverage by USA Today was very superficial.

And News Magazines?

During the past two and a half years there were only a dozen articles in newsweeklies that focused on job training (Business Week-8, Newsweek-2 and Time Magazine-2). Mirroring the trend in many of the major daily newspapers that were reviewed, these important newsweekly magazines have very little substantial coverage of job training issues. There were three areas of focus:

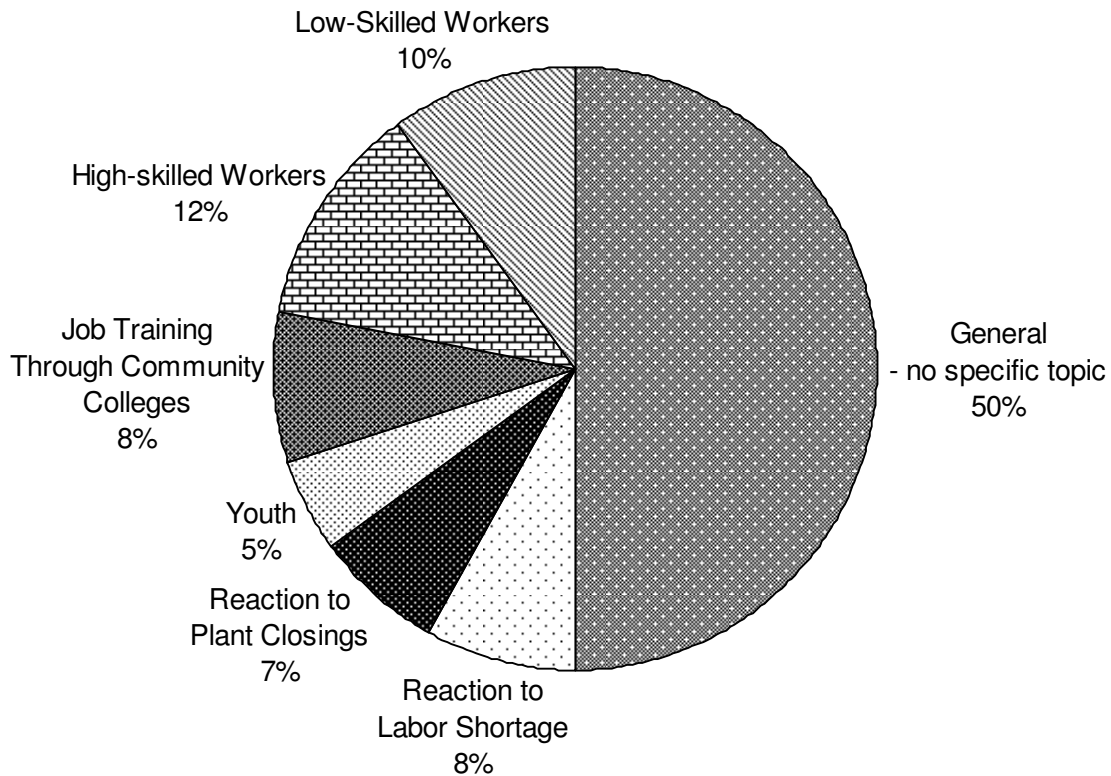
- Retraining of senior citizens or baby boomer early retirees (seven articles);

- Articles related to the “skills shortage” (three articles);
- And, a few articles on job training issues within the context of Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts (two articles).

In all cases, the articles were not very substantive.

A Major or Minor Focus of the Articles Reviewed

Media Coverage of Job Training By Subject Area



As the chart details, about 50 percent of all coverage of job training is very general in nature with no specific topic explained. When these issues were not the focus, the article generally talked about educational opportunities, the economy or impacts of globalization. Issues like job training for low-skilled, highly-skilled workers and youth are covered in some articles. There are also some articles on the role of community colleges in job training and a few articles that tie job training and plant closings.

Overwhelmingly, the term “job training” was the phrase used to describe these issues. More than three-quarters of all articles described these issues

using this term at least once in an article. Other terms used in reporting these issues in rank order were:

- Skills development
- Skill shortages
- Workforce development
- Occupational training
- Community college training

A. Findings

There are several major findings that warrant singling out. First, almost all the stories on job training focus on individuals and not on “the system” or job training programs. And, there is very modest coverage of the so-called “skills shortage” and its relationship to job training. Also, there is a lack of references to ongoing public policies which encourage and fund/assist job training. Finally, there is almost a complete absence of a business focus in job training articles.

Basic Trends

There were a number of primary trends in the coverage:

- Some articles described training in service-type jobs for companies like Target, CVS and Home Depot that would result in jobs “that don’t have big paychecks.” (Rocky Mountain News, 8/15/06)
- Several articles cited the “uncoordinated approach” to workforce training. (New York Times, 5/31/07)
- There were a few articles like the Washington Post article (2/26/07) that noted “innovative approaches to job training is upending the conclusion, widespread in the 1990s, that training programs don’t work.”
- A number of articles noted that there have been funding decreases for government job training programs. “Federal funding for workforce training has dropped precipitously since 2000, even though jobs require more technical skills, studies indicate” (Chicago Tribune, 10/4/07). Similarly the Philadelphia Inquirer (8/4/06) said that job training funds in their area had been cut 15 percent in the past several years. “Business needs skilled workers...and there has been an erosion of federal funding for job training over many years,” said another Chicago Tribune article (9/19/06).

- Often, articles talked about “pilot” programs, not full scale approaches (Chicago Tribune, 10/4/07, Atlanta Journal & Constitution, 11/2/07).
- There was very little specific mention of the various federal and state job training and workforce development programs. Instead, the articles concentrated on local efforts. It is likely that many of the job training programs described were federal or state efforts but these are not noted in the articles.
- And, there was very little mention of job training programs operated or coordinated by private industry.

How These Issues Relate to Workers Shortages

Surprisingly, there was occasional coverage of a skilled worker shortage and the relationship to job training efforts. For example:

- Utility workers: USA Today (5/17/07), “there may not be enough welders, plant operators and other skilled workers to build and run all the (new) facilities.”
- Nurses: Atlanta Journal & Constitution (10/7/07) and the Washington Post (6/10/07)
- Air traffic controllers: Chicago Tribune (3/8/07)
- Truck drivers: Chicago Tribune (10/26/06)
- Teachers: Atlanta Journal & Constitution (7/25/05)
- Bio-tech workers: Washington Post (9/13/07)
- Public safety: Chicago Tribune (4/11/07)

Plant Layoffs and Job Training

The moderate number of stories about large plant layoffs and the need for job training opportunities was almost formulaic for newspapers. First came the story about a company announcement of an impending layoff. Then, newspapers a few days after would begin to talk about the options for various localities once the layoffs occurred. The job training articles were always at the top of the list of predictable responses. Overall, these articles were quite pessimistic in tone. The stories about plant layoffs usually began by stating that hundreds or even thousands of well-paying blue-collar jobs were being lost. Then, the concept of retraining these laid-off workers was introduced, almost as a last resort.

For example, when Delphi announced layoffs throughout its plants in the Midwest there were numerous local stories. "Dayton is building an 8½ acre job training center anticipating the disruption," said the Chicago Tribune (7/25/07). The Los Angeles Times (10/30/05) carried a similar story about layoffs in Warren, Ohio.

The Philadelphia Inquirer (9/21/06) focused on efforts to mitigate the effect of 8,000 lost jobs in New Jersey at Lucent and Alcatel through job training.

And, the Chicago Tribune (2/18/07) looked at job training efforts in Gary, Indiana for ex-steelworkers and autoworkers.

In all of the articles, it was noted that the higher paying jobs of former employers were not being matched by lesser paying jobs obtained after job training. "But, at least it's a job," said a Gary woman in the Chicago Tribune article.

Fraud and Abuse

There were a handful of stories centered on fraud and abuse in government-sponsored job training programs. The stories ranged from efforts to offer low-wage workers and ex-offenders job training that resulted in fraud (Philadelphia Inquirer, 12/8/06) to abuse by local government officials steering contracts to friends and relatives (Atlanta Journal & Constitution, 3/16/06).

Sometimes, there was outright theft of government funds by program managers that was illustrated (Atlanta Journal & Constitution, 9/17/06, and Los Angeles Times, 7/5/07).

Discrimination in Job Training

There were also a handful of articles focused on job training discrimination. An article by USA Today (8/30/07) mostly centered on racial discrimination against African Americans in job training programs with "job training slots filled by mostly white men." Other articles (Philadelphia Inquirer, 1/31/07, Rocky Mountain News, 4/26/06, and the Washington Post, 3/2/07) looked at discrimination against women in job training programs.

Relationship Between Community Colleges/Higher Education and Job Training

There were a few articles that cited the advantages of both local community colleges and four-year colleges in providing job training skills. "Education and skills training are the two greatest investments that an individual can

make,” said an Atlanta Journal & Constitution article about community colleges and job training (5/14/07).

Several articles talk about specific job training programs to meet “sectoral” needs. For example, the Washington Post (4/6/07) focused on the Northern Virginia Community College which has established its newest campus “to educate and train nurses, dental hygienists and diagnostic technicians who are in short supply.”

Baby Boomer Retirements and Job Training for Seniors

Two different trends were outlined in the context of baby boomer retirees and job training for seniors. One of the topics that was uncovered was the continuing demographic trend of baby boomers retiring, sometimes resulting in job shortages in particular occupations. And, the other trend of some baby boomers opting to “work, save, pause and then work again” (Atlanta Journal & Constitution, 9/21/05) was documented by a study. Each trend led to a number of stories.

The Los Angeles Times (9/3/07) noted that “older workers may sometimes feel cast out of the economy. Overlooked for job training.” Meanwhile, other articles pointed to seniors being trained for low-wage work jobs at McDonalds, Target and Taco Bell (Chicago Tribune, 9/10/07), mainly to supplement a meager retirement income. Employers often cite senior citizens for dedication and commitment to the job having “lessons from life” (Washington Post, 6/15/07), but companies are not portrayed as offering job training to seniors for highly skilled and higher paying positions.

Programs for Youth

As might be expected, newspaper coverage of job training for youth as opposed to older Americans is very different. The articles centering on youth focus on summer jobs programs (Philadelphia Inquirer 3/15/07) or intern programs for white-collar youth (Philadelphia Inquirer 8/10/07). As might be expected, these articles were printed either just before the summer or at the end of the same period. The articles analyzed under this topic usually fell under the banner of “summer jobs for youth” and barely mentioned the job training component of any of these jobs, nor how long the job training lasted within the summer job program.

Coverage of job training for youth was very cursory.

Union Training Centers, Trade Schools and the Efforts of Private Industry

There were a few articles that talked about efforts by various unions like the plumbers (Chicago Tribune, 1/7/07), the construction trades (Washington

Post, 8/8/07) and the Teamsters (Los Angeles Times, 6/20/07) who have established mostly limited, local job training and apprenticeship programs in their sectors. In all cases, the articles pointed out that those who finished these multi-year training programs could expect good jobs and good salaries.

There were also a few articles about so-called "trade schools." "A decade ago, vocational education students might have spent their time rebuilding engines, welding sheet metal or learning to cook. But at Chicago High School for Agriculture students learn the physiology of animals, design buildings using computer programs, and the chemistry of food," said a Chicago Tribune (11/1/07) article.

Finally, there were a small handful of articles about how private enterprise trains its workers (USA Today, 12/21/06). Considering that these are large-scale programs by private industry it is surprising that more stories in newspapers, especially the business pages, do not center on this type of training.

Who's Quoted?

Since there is a pattern of personalization in many of the job trainings stories (see below), individuals are the most frequently quoted in these articles. Next, government officials who administer or fund job training programs are mentioned. Some companies, especially low-wage employers, are also quoted.

Those not quoted often include nonprofit organizations, industries that implement large-scale job training and academic experts who might have studied job training trends. Community leaders like clergy, teachers, health professionals and others were not quoted in the articles reviewed for this study.

B. Implications

The "frame" for job training is mildly positive in most of the stories studied. There were few negative stories. But, the newspaper portrayal of job training is very limited. Job training is portrayed for individual workers as helpful to "move up the ladder," assisting laid-off industrial workers, and helping post-retiree older Americans find new employment. Job training is also seen in very few articles as helping address a job shortage in particular industries or professions.

However, much of the coverage is not systemic and does not put the need for training or skills development within a larger context of the 21st century economy. Coverage usually outlines specifically how job training works and

what its advantages are to individual workers, but lacks a broader description of its overall impact. Coverage is often personalized, leaving the reader sympathetic to workers highlighted in the story. The reader is not left with a sense that public policy is involved or that there are larger implications for the economy. Large government job training programs are barely mentioned.

There were few really positive stories about job training that looked at how the system works and its real advantages. Lip service was often given in articles about perceived advantages but there were no real facts and figures to back up claims. There also were very few mentions of various government or private industry job training programs.

Diverse voices were not found in the majority of articles reviewed; officials were usually the spokesperson. Even ongoing academic research was not quoted very frequently.

These findings present some real challenges for advocates. The media does not place a high priority on explaining the specifics of job training. The implications for advocates are that the community will have to work hard to expand quality coverage which details all of the important aspects of job training and workforce development. Nor does the media differentiate between the various job training programs in the U.S. Efforts by private industry are virtually absent from major newspaper coverage. While the "frame" of most stories is mildly positive, the focus of many stories is so personalized that policy concerns are rarely outlined. Stories are locally, not regionally or nationally focused

For better or worse, the media has no standard definition of job training. The advocate community is challenged to come up with its own uniform definition(s) of job training. This will require the advocate community to be very focused on developing and utilizing common language with the media as job training is defined and detailed. Further, since there appears to be no "beat" for job training coverage, one must be created from an assortment of business, education, job and family, and economic reporters.

And, advocates need to develop strategies that will inform the media about the relationship between job training and the changing dynamics of the 21st century workforce. This was not discussed in any of the articles reviewed. Finally, there is a challenge to "lift" the articles and media coverage beyond purely localized concerns. This issue must be seen as a vital regional and national issue, not just a set of disparate initiatives that have a local impact.

C. Next Steps

The media is a megaphone to reach policymakers. How an issue like job training is “covered” by the media influences how policymakers look at the issue. The fact that there is little discussion of public policy in most job training articles is a critical point. Further, the lack of the “business perspective” means that most business people themselves, and policymakers, are missing an important component of the overall job training “system.”

There must be a carefully planned, strategic communications effort targeted to the media if major public policy change in the job training area is to succeed. Of course, solid research and information about how job training works, its challenges and what needs to be changed are important. But, part of the process of policy change has to be the strategic use of the media so that both the policymakers and the public can get a clear picture of job training.

Finally, our framing of job training will require that the media itself more fully understands job training and workforce development issues. This will involve identifying and working with a wide variety of media who only occasionally cover these issues.