

Beyond the Factory Floor

Reframing Manufacturing Jobs for the Public Good

Manufacturing has an image problem. The American public thinks the manufacturing sector is important to the economy, but tends to look down on the jobs themselves. Manufacturing work is often considered dirty, unappealing, and narrowly associated with the factory floor. Because of the associations with heavy machinery, physical labor, and drudgerous, repetitive assembly lines, people tend to assume that manufacturing jobs are jobs of last resort, done by people who don't have other prospects in life.

Negative perceptions and misunderstandings about manufacturing matter because they can lead to workers being stigmatized, perpetuate a material devaluation of the work (for instance, through low pay and poor working conditions), undermine investment in the sector, and make it harder for manufacturing employers to recruit a diverse workforce. When people see manufacturing as low-status and undesirable work, there is no pressure for policy change that would improve the quality of the jobs or training pathways.

We can address these problems by increasing people's perception that these jobs are important and desirable right now, *and* at the same time building support for improving the quality of these jobs. If we focus only on increasing the appeal of manufacturing jobs, without building support for change, we risk entrenching unhelpful ways of thinking about the status quo. For instance, people sometimes hold the *Gender Essentialism* mindset that men are naturally, biologically more suited to *men's work*, such as manufacturing, or the *Reverse Racism* mindset that it's really white workers who are more discriminated against. We need to steer away from this kind of thinking and instead build support for changes that make these jobs better and more equitable—through improvements to pay, safer working conditions, and better training and apprenticeship opportunities.

While the goals of boosting the appeal of manufacturing and building support for change may seem in tension, they are easily reconciled. In our framing strategies, we do this by stressing the *social value* of these jobs. These jobs are valuable because they contribute to the common good, and for this reason we need structural changes to improve compensation and working conditions. The frames we recommend below help us do this by taking a wide lens on the role of manufacturing in society. They all talk about the *collective benefits* that can be achieved with a better manufacturing sector and call for change. This emphasis on manufacturing as a means to the common good (rather than simply being important as an end in itself) can boost the desirability of manufacturing jobs and build support for changes to policy and practice.

About This Project

This brief sits within the FrameWorks Institute's [WorkShift project](#), which advances new ways to talk about work to build public support for reshaping labor systems. The goal of this project is to help bring about the redistribution of power needed for a more just and equitable society. This project is generously supported by the Square One Foundation.

Three Ways to Increase the Appeal of Manufacturing Work and Build Support for Improving Job Quality

1. Talk about how manufacturing helps *contribute to the common good*.

What to do:

Talk about manufacturing jobs as valuable because they contribute to society, and call for the government to invest in this important sector. When we do this, we boost the perception of the desirability of some of the more stigmatized manufacturing jobs—for instance, work that requires on-the-job training or certification, such as a machine or forklift operator.

A *Common Good* frame can prompt people to think more broadly about the purpose of work in American society, tapping into the cultural mindset that work should meet our collective needs. This is likely to boost the social desirability of manufacturing because contributing to society feels worthwhile and like something that working people can be proud of.

What does it look like?

Example: *The goods that stock our shelves, the materials that build our homes, the equipment that powers our hospitals—none of that happens without the people who make them. Manufacturing workers contribute to society every single day, producing things that all of us rely on. That kind of work deserves to be recognized as the public good it is. When we invest in manufacturing, creating good jobs with opportunities for training and skill-building, everyone in our communities benefits.*

Avoid talking about manufacturing as inherently *fulfilling*.

By contrast, when we talk about manufacturing as valuable because it is inherently fulfilling work, we don't boost the perception that it is desirable. This is likely because we come up against the perception (and truth) that not all manufacturing jobs *are* fulfilling, meaningful, or enjoyable.

This frame also focuses our attention on the importance of work to individuals, rather than to society. When people think in this way, it can bring to mind the natural aptitudes, talents, and drives of individuals—rather than the more structural forces that shape work.

Avoid talking about manufacturing as making our economy more *resilient*.

When we say that manufacturing is valuable because it makes our economy more resilient, we can increase the appeal of manufacturing jobs, but we actively undermine support for change. In some audiences, this frame weakens structural thinking about the economy, such as the idea that laws and policies design and maintain the economy, and it reduces support for important policies—such as policies to break up monopolies or policies to make it easier to join unions. These unhelpful effects might be explained by descriptions of resilience as a trait of natural systems, such as bodies, that can bounce back after injury without intervention. The idea that systems can heal themselves works against the need for policy changes.

This finding also highlights why it's important to consider the wider impacts of frames on thinking, beyond simply boosting the desirability of manufacturing jobs.

2. Use the metaphor of manufacturing as the *Backbone* or *Life Force* of our economy—but be sure to name which policy changes are needed in manufacturing.

What to do:

Talk about manufacturing as the *Backbone* or *Life Force* of the economy. For instance, we can describe how manufacturing provides a central support for our economy, like a spine supports our body. Or how manufacturing is the *Life Force* that flows through the economy, like our bodies depend on circulation. Both metaphors stress how manufacturing is a vital aspect of healthy economic functioning.

For these metaphors, it's important to be clear about the changes needed to achieve a better manufacturing system in the United States that is better for workers and the environment. For instance, we can call for better wages, safer workplaces, increased benefits like paid family leave, and investment in jobs that provide what we collectively need—such as clean energy and renewable materials. The important framing move here is to transition from “manufacturing is important now” to “manufacturing can be better for people and the planet.”

Body metaphors can be helpful because bodies are complex natural systems that can map onto social systems, such as the economy, and situate manufacturing as a vital part of a wider functioning whole. This sense that manufacturing is vital and essential could be what increases the desirability of the jobs.

However, as we note above in connection with the *Resilience* frame, body metaphors carry a risk of cuing the idea that economy can regulate itself without intervention. Further, from our research into the cultural mindsets of manufacturing, we know that people often think about manufacturing as important (even talking about it as the [“backbone” of the economy](#)), but this doesn't automatically come with an understanding of which problems exist in the sector or what the future of manufacturing should look like. For both of these reasons, we must accompany these metaphors with a description of the policy changes we need. When we do this, we can increase support for these changes and make the jobs seem more socially desirable now.

What does it look like?

Example: *Manufacturing is the backbone of our economy. It's the central support system that keeps our country going—from providing everyday tools to creating life-saving medical devices. Keeping that backbone strong means investing in good jobs—jobs with better wages, safe workplaces, and increased benefits—and building new industries around the clean energy and renewable materials our future requires. When we strengthen manufacturing and create better manufacturing jobs, we strengthen the whole economy.*

Example: *Manufacturing is the life force of our economy—it flows through everything, from the clean energy systems powering our homes, to the medical equipment in our hospitals, to the materials that build our roads and bridges. When manufacturing workers earn good wages and have safe workplaces and better benefits, that vitality circulates through our whole society, sustaining communities and powering the industries our future depends on.*

3. Talk about how some young people face a particularly *Steep Climb* into work and need tailored resources and support.

What to do:

Bring equity into the picture without using the word equity—by talking about how the pathways into work are a *steeper climb* for some young people than for others. This metaphor helps us talk about how to address inequities through resources tailored to what young people need in manufacturing and other sectors: Better apprenticeships, training, and workplace policies.

The *Steep Climb* metaphor draws on the idea that life is a journey, and we all benefit collectively when young people have the right support to transition into work. This is another frame that can put manufacturing into the wider socioeconomic context of work. Similar to how the *Common Good* frame appeals to the notion that manufacturing is valuable when it contributes to the common good, the *Steep Climb* frame appeals to the notion that it's *good for society* when young people are appropriately supported in work. Again, this idea of collective benefit can help boost the social desirability of manufacturing. The emphasis on equitable training and support might also help with this because it makes people think of jobs that require skill and development—rather than the trope of physically drudgerous manufacturing jobs that no one wants to do. It can expand people's ideas about *who* can do manufacturing jobs by showing that people can be trained to do them, rather than being naturally “men's work.”

We need to be clear about the changes that are needed to help young people enter the workplace, regardless of gender or race. When we do this, we boost support for youth-focused policies in some audiences—like providing free skills training for young adults or providing tax credits for companies that offer mental health benefits.

What does it look like?

Example: *Manufacturing can offer pathways into skilled, well-paying jobs—but for too many young people, that climb is far steeper than it needs to be. Young people of color, immigrant youth, and those from low-income backgrounds often start without the networks, resources, or workplace opportunities that make good manufacturing jobs accessible. The jobs they get don't always pay enough to support them while they gain experience. We can change that. By expanding apprenticeship programs, offering living wages, and creating workplaces with mentorship and flexible schedules, we can make manufacturing a sector where any young person—whatever their background—can build a future for themselves and for all of us.*

Putting It All Together: The Social Value of Manufacturing

The framing recommendations we share above do helpful work on their own, and they can also be used in combination to tell a powerful story about the social value of manufacturing. We illustrate this below with the *Backbone* metaphor, but the same example would work equally well with the *Life Force* metaphor.

Example (with Backbone Metaphor)

Manufacturing is the backbone of our economy—a central support that keeps our country going by building the things we use every day, from construction materials to life-saving medical devices to technologies powering our future. Manufacturing workers contribute to the common good, and we should treat them that way. That means big public investment in manufacturing so that it works for everyone: Fair wages, safe workplaces, and ongoing training and skill-building for current and new workers.

Right now, though, some young people face a much steeper climb into good jobs than others— young people of color, immigrant youth, and those from low-income families often lack the networks and support to get a foothold. Manufacturing employers can provide that stepping stone by expanding apprenticeships, offering living wages from the start, and building workplaces where everyone can thrive. When we invest in manufacturing and open up the pathways in, the whole economy is stronger for it.