

The Jobs Americans Do

Popular ideas about the working class are woefully out of date. Here are nine people who tell a truer story of what the American work force does today — and will do tomorrow.

Introduction by [BINYAMIN APPELBAUM](#) Photographs by RYAN PFLUGER

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The Future of Work



Ofelia Bersabe, Santa Clara, Calif. • The Home Health Aide Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

Forget the images of men in hard hats standing before factory gates, of men with coal-blackened faces, of men perched high above New York City on steel beams. The emerging face of the American working class is a Hispanic woman who has never set foot on a factory floor. That's not the

kind of work much of the working class does anymore. Instead of making things, they are more often paid to serve people: to care for someone else's children or someone else's parents; to clean another family's home.

The decline of the old working class has meant both an economic triumph for the nation and a personal tribulation for many of the workers.

Technological progress has made American farms and factories more productive than ever, creating great wealth and cutting the cost of food and most other products. But the work no longer requires large numbers of workers. In 1900, factories and farms employed 60 percent of the work force. By 1950, a half-century later, those two sectors employed 36 percent. In 2014, they employed less than 10 percent.

For more than a century, since the trend was first documented, people have been prophesying a dire future in which the working class would no longer work. In 1964, a group of prominent liberals wrote President Johnson to warn of a "cybernation revolution" inexorably creating "a permanent impoverished and jobless class established in the midst of potential abundance."

Machines have taken the jobs of millions of Americans, and there is every indication that the trend will continue. In October, Budweiser successfully tested a self-driving truck by delivering beer more than 120 miles to a warehouse in Colorado. In December, Amazon opened a small convenience store near its Seattle headquarters that has no cashiers. Customers — for now, Amazon employees only — are billed automatically as they leave the store. In January, Bank of America opened branches in Denver and Minneapolis that are staffed by a lone employee, A.T.M.s and video terminals. And Americans are making a growing share of purchases online: about 8.4 percent of retail sales in 2016. These changes are driven by consumer preferences, not just by corporate cost-cutting imperatives. People like shopping in bed in the middle of the night. People like that computers make fewer mistakes. And people grow accustomed to computers. A few years ago, I watched a woman walk up to a bank teller and ask where she could find an A.T.M. The teller asked if she could help.

No, the woman said, she just needed to withdraw some money.

But the forecasters were wrong in the most important respect. Workers continue to find work, but now the jobs are in service. Taking care of aging baby boomers, in particular, has become by far the largest driver of job growth in the American economy. Among the occupations the Bureau of Labor Statistics expects to grow most rapidly over the next decade: physical-therapy assistants, home health aides, occupational-therapy assistants, nurse practitioners, physical therapists, occupational-therapy aides, physician assistants. ... You get the idea. Nine of the 12 fastest-growing fields are different ways of saying “nurse.”

In 1950, service work made up about 40 percent of working-class labor in the United States. By 2005, that share had climbed to 56 percent, according to data from a 2013 analysis by the economists David Autor at M.I.T. and David Dorn at the University of Zurich. The available evidence, Autor said, suggests that this trend has continued “very rapidly” over the last decade, increasing the share of American workers who work in the service industries.

The rise of service-sector employment reflects the fact that Americans on average have more money to spend and that we are spending relatively less of that money on physical goods, because those goods have become cheaper. It took 10.5 hours of work at average wages to buy a bicycle in 1979; it took just four hours in 2015. Most Americans don’t want a second and third bicycle, so that leaves more money for other purposes. And increasingly, the money is spent on services: help around the home, entertainment and vacations and, most of all, education and health care.

These jobs are difficult to mechanize or to perform with greater efficiency. Convalescents cannot be trained to eat more quickly. A phlebotomist cannot draw blood from two arms at once. Robots, as yet, cannot change diapers. Moreover, consumers may have an emotional investment in seeing this caring work performed by people rather than machines. They may be willing to pay for a personal touch.

Another limitation on our ability to program computers to do the work of people is summarized by the observation of the Hungarian scientist Michael Polanyi that “we can know more than we can tell.” Consider the work of a security guard, who is basically tasked with sounding the alarm if something doesn’t seem right. Technology improves security, but it is not easy to write a formula approximating intuition.

The Cassandras, however, were right to warn about poverty in the midst of abundance. Personal-service providers — “servants,” as they once were called — tend to be poorly paid. There is little job security; the benefits are meager; the work is physically demanding and emotionally draining. It is not particularly surprising that women and immigrants have been more likely to take these jobs than native-born men. For many of the caretaking service jobs, less than 10 percent of the work force is male.

The wages of service work increasingly determine the welfare of the American working class and, to a substantial degree, the broader economy. But politicians have paid little attention. That’s partly because Americans continue to view service work as a way station, not a way of life. Teenagers get their first job at McDonald’s; mothers dip back into the work force as receptionists; seniors make a little extra money as Walmart greeters. The reality is that these are the kinds of jobs millions of Americans hold for their entire working lives. And increasingly, these are the jobs their children will perform, too.

—*Binyamin Appelbaum*

1. Ofelia Bersabe (Portrait Above)

Santa Clara, Calif. • The Home Health Aide

By Elise Craig

Two major events in Ofelia Bersabe’s life persuaded her to become a home health aide. In 2008, the Bay Area electronics company where she worked for 21 years as a sample-department supervisor let her go in a mass layoff. And that same year, her mother, whom she followed to the United

States from the Philippines nearly two decades earlier, died. “When she passed away in my arms, I felt that I hadn’t given her the full attention I wanted to,” Bersabe said. “I promised myself that I would concentrate on taking care of women, especially seniors. In that way, I feel like I’m still taking care of her.”

Nine years later, at age 69, Bersabe is among nearly a million Americans who work as home health aides, a field that is expected to grow 38 percent by 2024, faster than most other occupations, thanks in large part to the aging baby-boom population. Already a senior herself, Bersabe works 65 hours a week caring for two elderly clients with dementia. She spends five 12- and 14-hour night shifts in her clients’ homes, providing companionship, reminders to take medicine and light housekeeping for one client, and everything from bathing and dressing to diaper changing for the other.

Having two jobs is partly a necessity and partly a hedge; should one of her clients die, she can still rely on income from the other. She also needs the money. Because she is a member of the Service Employees International Union Local 2015, the agencies that Bersabe works for pay her \$16.13 and \$11 an hour. California’s current minimum wage is \$10.50, but the living wage for someone like Bersabe is \$11.29.

Bersabe is grateful for the money and has no complaints about her wages, but she acknowledges that making a living in the Bay Area’s technology bubble is tough. She lost her house after the 2008 layoff, and she and her husband, who works nights as a security guard, now share a three-bedroom apartment rental behind Levi’s Stadium, where the 49ers play, with two other elderly couples.

The gratitude Bersabe’s clients show her — one kisses her when she arrives — is incredibly fulfilling, she said, but the work is hard. Dementia patients can be very unpredictable. “I have a very tame cat, and when they start to have sun-downing” — the late-afternoon confusion that can be a symptom of dementia — “I have a wild tiger,” she said. “But it’s not the person herself, it’s the sickness.” Once, when a client began to get agitated and yell

at Bersabe, she sneaked around to the front door and rang the doorbell. The client welcomed Bersabe as an old friend that she hadn't seen in a long time.

Bersabe expects to work through her 70s and 80s and maybe even into her 90s. "I'll work as long as I can stand on my own two legs," she said. "As long as I can drive and walk and God permits me, I'll enjoy the job I love." Bersabe has no intention of being a burden to her three children, who have families of their own and are scattered from Kentucky to the Philippines. "Honestly, I am thinking, when the time comes, who is going to take care of me?" she said. "I don't want to bother my kids. I want them to see me as a kicking woman, like I was before."

Elise Craig is a freelance writer and editor based in San Francisco.



Sonia Ufot, Brooklyn • The Hair Braider Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

2. Sonia Ufot

Brooklyn • The Hair Braider

By Jazmine Hughes

On a recent visit to Jennifer’s Beauty World, in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Sonia Ufot started by detangling my tightly coiled hair and blow-drying it pin-straight, then she parted a small section into an individual plait, wrapped a section of filler hair around the root and braided it straight down for 16 inches. She repeated this step around 80 more times, over the course of about six hours, all that time spent either standing or hunched over on a high stool. “It takes time and patience for you to be able to stand on your feet for hours to braid somebody’s hair,” she said, “so you really have to love doing it.”

Ufot, 38, has known how to braid since she was 15; she picked up the skill in Warri, Nigeria, where she was born. A family friend owned a braiding shop, and she visited every day, watching the women do their work and, eventually, persuading them to let her practice on their customers’ heads. She majored in economics at Delta State University in Nigeria, but while she was at school, she found out she had thyroid cancer and eventually moved to the United States for treatment. She started braiding hair for the money and never returned to economics. “There’s more money doing hair,” she told me. And because she’s in such high demand, Ufot can work 12 to 15 hour days, sometimes seven days a week, depending on appointments. She charges between \$100 to \$250 for each style, depending on its intricacy. She hasn’t gone on vacation in five years.

Unlike most people trained in cosmetology, braiders, many of whom are immigrants, don’t use chemicals, sharp objects or heat; just a comb, oil, water and their hands. Individual states legislate the requirements for becoming a licensed hair braider; in several, braiders — even those with a pre-existing knowledge of braiding — are required to complete more than 2,000 hours of training at cosmetology schools, which can cost tens of thousands of dollars and whose classes have almost nothing to do with styling black women’s hair. Many cosmetology schools don’t even offer braiding instruction.

In 2016, Iowa ended its cosmetology-license requirement for hair braiders, allowing them instead to pass basic health-and-sanitation exams with the

state; Nebraska, too, recently ended its laborious stipulation of 2,100 hours of cosmetology training for natural hair braiders. In New York, braiders are required to obtain a natural-hair license, which allows the stylists to perform the chemical-free techniques of styling black hair — for example, shampooing hair, applying extensions, making dreadlocks, braiding — and not much else. It costs about \$70 and mandates schooling, which costs more. But many braiders operate without licenses.

Ufot wants to go to cosmetology school; her goal is to enroll by year's end, if she can get enough financial aid. She figures it will cost her about \$15,000, so she'll continue braiding and attend night classes as long she can get someone to look after her 6-year-old daughter. She told me that she wants to learn how to do all types of hair — dyeing, perms — and dreams of owning her own shop. “I want to get my cosmetology license so I'm able to do all of the things,” she told me, laughing. “I want to be able to cut white people's hair!”

Jazmine Hughes is an associate editor for the magazine.



Adriana Alvarez, Cicero, Ill. • The Fast-Food Worker Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

3. Adriana Alvarez

Cicero, Ill. • The Fast-Food Worker

By Ben Austen

Adriana Alvarez was leaving her McDonald's at the end of a daylong shift in 2014 when a man stopped her in the parking lot. She'd noticed him inside, buying coffee, and now he asked if she'd heard about the Fight for \$15. Laughing, she said \$15 an hour for fast-food work sounded crazy. She was racing to pick up her son Manny from day care, but she talked with the guy later that evening. She told him that she earned \$8.50 an hour, just 25 cents above the Illinois minimum wage. She'd been at the same McDonald's in Cicero, a largely Latino town west of Chicago, for about four years. In all that time, she had one raise: 10 cents. The man explained that she'd been cheated even out of her low pay: Workers at restaurants had been required, illegally, to punch out before tallying up their registers or breaking down French-fry boxes. "I think about it now," Alvarez says. "God, I was stupid."

A few weeks after meeting the organizer, Alvarez said, she and her co-workers handed in a petition demanding that the store manager show them more respect in front of customers. Not only did the yelling stop, she said, but they soon received a raise of as much as 75 cents. "Pushing works," Alvarez says she learned. In March 2014, she joined her first rally, a multicity coordinated Fight for \$15 day of action.

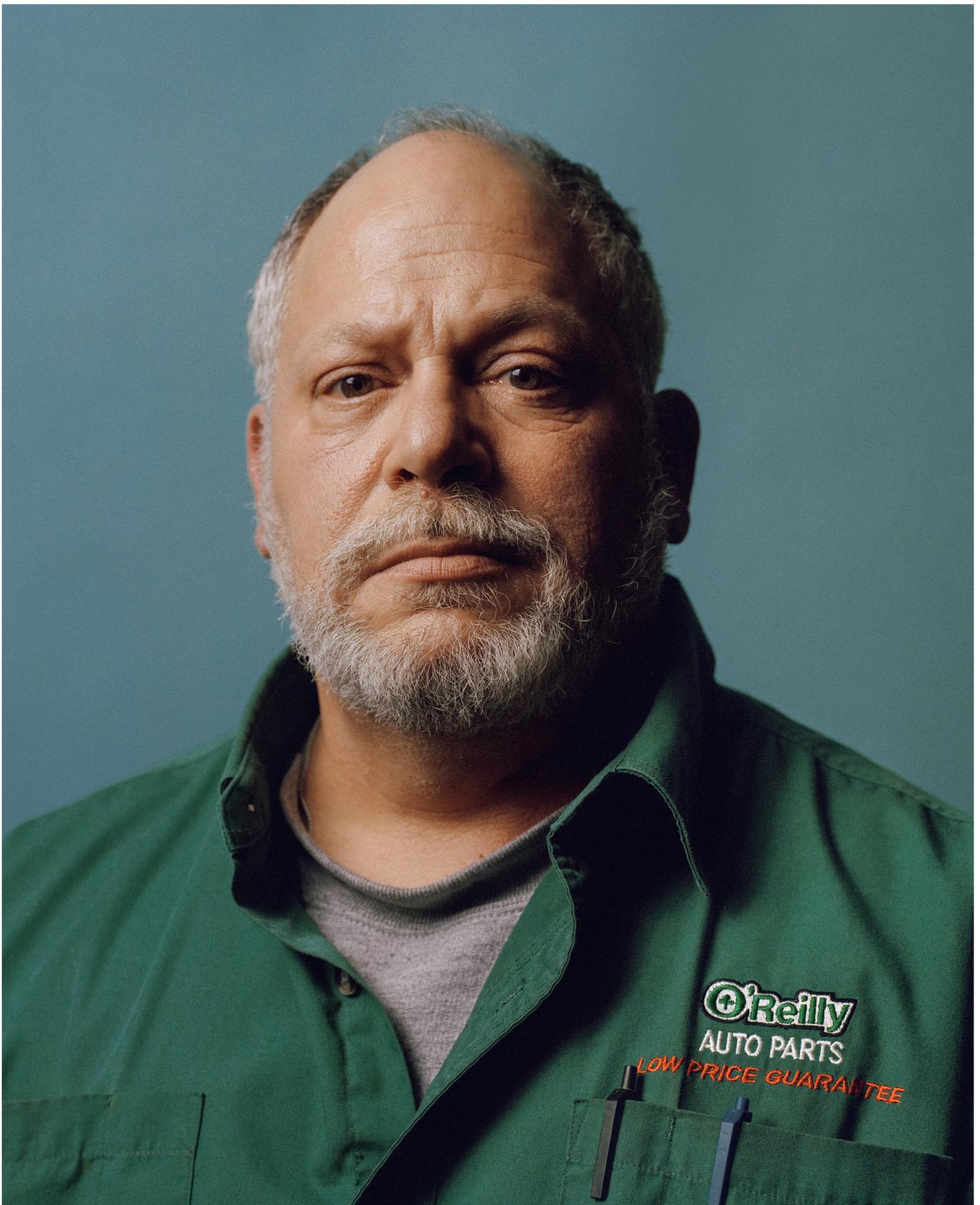
Alvarez is now 24 and still works at the same McDonald's. Nationally, jobs in retail and food services outnumber those in manufacturing by more than two to one. The country's largest private employers include Walmart, McDonald's, Kroger and the conglomeration of KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell. These chains are no longer places just for teenagers to work part time: The average age of a fast-food employee has climbed to 29; like Alvarez, a third of them have spent some time in college.

Fight for \$15 doesn't operate like a traditional union: There are no contracts with employers, and Alvarez and others pay no dues. The Service Employees International Union has been its primary source of funding from its inception in New York City, in 2012. Yet Fight for \$15 organizers take credit for winning wage increases for 22 million workers in America. Although the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 hasn't budged since 2009,

numerous cities and states since 2012 have raised their base pay to \$12, \$13 and even \$15 an hour. Under President Trump, the effort is sure to face additional hurdles. But Fight for \$15 helped lead the campaign to derail Trump's first pick for labor secretary, Andrew Puzder, organizing workers from his fast-food chains to march on their stores and to share their stories of wage theft. Low pay is an issue that crosses party lines: Two of every five U.S. workers earn less than \$15 an hour.

Today Alvarez makes \$11 an hour at McDonald's. She has never been put on the schedule for a full 40-hour week; she receives no benefits, health coverage or overtime. Yet the raise has allowed her to replace the moldering floorboards in her basement apartment. And Alvarez has been transformed in other ways by the labor fight. She has emerged as one of its spokeswomen, and the job has taken on a new significance. "When people say we should go back to school, I say the adjunct professors who joined us went to school," Alvarez said. "How come they're not doing better? I'm not just serving customers. I'm also serving these innocent ladies" — her co-workers — "who might not be conscious of their rights. I'm like their protector."

Ben Austen is working on a book about Chicago's Cabrini-Green public-housing complex.



Stuart Culver, Brooklyn Park, Minn. • The Delivery Driver Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

4. Stuart Culver

Brooklyn Park, Minn. • The Delivery Driver

By Jaime Lowe

Stuart Culver starts his overnight shift for O'Reilly Auto Parts at 7 p.m. and finishes about nine hours later. A relay driver, he exchanges freight — mufflers, batteries, drums of window-washer fluid — with another driver in La Crosse, Wis., and then makes deliveries to five stores on his route. The road has changed over the two decades that he has been driving trucks. “In today’s day and age, it’s really stressful,” he says. “You’re a lot more likely to be struck because of other drivers using their cellphone.” The regulatory landscape has changed, too. Every year, for example, Culver has to undergo a Department of Transportation physical, because he has sleep apnea.

In recent years, online giants like Amazon have pushed for ever-faster delivery times, sometimes delivering orders on the same day. As consumers increase their online shopping — total retail sales in the United States increased only 2.9 percent last year, but online sales rose 15.1 percent — distribution networks have adapted by integrating more and more consumer destinations into their systems. Mark Merz, a spokesman for O'Reilly, attributes part of the company’s success to “having inventory immediately available when a customer needs those parts.”

Though O'Reilly extended its reach to 4,829 stores in 47 states last year and revenue surpassed \$8.5 billion, that growth hasn't led to an expansion of its work force or changed the nature of its jobs. “We’ve been short-staffed for over six months,” Culver says. “Guys are doing extra work and taking on extra stores for their routes.” Culver, who belongs to the Teamsters Local 120, says he is not paid by the amount of time it takes him to complete his deliveries but according to the route driven, which varies from year to year. Culver says he made roughly \$53,000 last year, earning almost \$23 an hour. “Our wages haven’t really gone up in the same way that other jobs’ wages have gone up,” he says. “I have to go to special school to get my license, and how we’re treated and looked at hasn’t really changed in 20 years.”

Culver, who is 56, doesn't expect that technology will eliminate work like his. “I don’t see how automatic truck drivers are going to work,” he says. “There are so many variables.” O'Reilly still needs people to operate the

electric pallet jacks and hydraulic liftgates at the rear of their delivery trucks, still relies on backs and arms to unload and inspect orders. Despite the toll the work has taken on Culver — two operations to fuse vertebrae in his neck and a lower-back operation — he says he likes the job. “I’m happy doing this, I enjoy what I do,” he says. “I hope I can make it to 65.”

Jaime Lowe is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the magazine.



Sandi Dolan, Las Vegas • The Customer-Service Rep Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

5. Sandi Dolan

Las Vegas • The Customer-Service Rep

By Eric Steuer

When Sandi Dolan moved to Las Vegas in 2014, to escape the cold Colorado winters, she'd been working primarily as a customer-service representative for more than a decade in the insurance industry. Dolan is remarkably upbeat, and she says she genuinely enjoys helping strangers solve problems. But she said that day after day of calls about accidents and claims made for a pretty depressing gig. "No one ever wants to talk to their insurance company," she said. "It's never a good phone call."

Not long after landing in Las Vegas, Dolan started looking for a job. She found a call-center opening with Zappos, the online shoe-and-apparel retailer. "I actually didn't know anything about the company," she said. "But after I was hired, I started talking to locals, and people were like: 'You have no idea, do you? We all tried to get in there.'"

Zappos has more than 500 people on its customer-service team, about a third of the company's total staff. Most employees work together in the company's headquarters, a 10-story building downtown that used to be Las Vegas's city hall. Employees like Dolan, who work the phones, start at \$14 an hour, about a dollar less than the median wage earned by the more than 2.5 million Americans who work as customer-service representatives. But Dolan, who makes slightly more than that, points out that, unlike at many other companies, most Zappos workers are full-time employees who receive benefits like health insurance and retirement plans.

At Zappos, employees are encouraged to interact with co-workers throughout the business and eat together on campus. The company frequently hosts events, ranging from product demonstrations to scavenger hunts, which are open to all employees. Dolan said this is one thing that makes her current work so much better than previous jobs. "I've been in places where I wasn't even allowed to take a break with someone if they were a different pay grade than I was," she said.

Another difference from Dolan's previous call-center jobs is that Zappos reps aren't limited in the amount of time they are allowed to spend on each conversation. "At other jobs, I'd be stressed because I'd have to resolve each call in about five minutes in order to make my numbers," Dolan said.

She knows she could be making more money somewhere else, but she wouldn't enjoy her day as much. "I figured I'd do this for six months just to get something local on my résumé so I could look for something else," she said. "But I haven't looked for a job since I stepped foot in here. I don't plan on it."

Eric Steuer is a contributing writer for Wired based in San Francisco.



Ruhatijuru Sebatutsi, Columbus, Ohio • The Meat Cutter Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

6. Ruhatijuru Sebatutsi

Columbus, Ohio • The Meat Cutter

By Abe Streep

Every day at 2 p.m., Ruhatiuru Sebatutsi, a Congolese refugee, rides a bus from outside Columbus, Ohio, where he lives with his wife and eight children, with 10 of his colleagues. The bus travels 40 miles southwest to Washington Court House, population about 14,000, and drops its passengers near a plant owned by the SugarCreek Packing Company, which produces pork and poultry products like bacon bits and sausage patties. Just before 4, Sebatutsi, 40, changes into the uniform of a meat cutter: cap, gloves and scrubs. Then he takes his place in a line of men and women from Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan and rural Ohio. Sebatutsi fled war in Congo as a teenager and spent most of his life in Rwanda's sprawling Gihembe refugee camp before being relocated to Ohio in 2015. Once the shift starts, he pushes meat through cutting machines. "You push again and again," he told me through a translator. "It doesn't require a lot of knowledge." There are three breaks per nine-hour shift: 15 minutes early on, a 30-minute meal break, then 10 minutes toward the end. At 1 a.m. he takes the bus home. When he arrives, his wife and children are sleeping. He works seven days a week, making \$11.50 an hour, time and a half on Saturdays and double on Sundays. "I am so lucky," he said.

Central Ohio is particularly welcoming to refugees, having resettled more than 17,000 since 1983. In November 2016, the region became a flash point for those opposed to resettlement when a Somali-born Ohio State University student was killed by police after attacking pedestrians. Still, in early February, the Columbus mayor, Andrew Ginther, signed an executive order supporting the resettlement of refugees. His reasons were economic as well as altruistic. Nearly 12 percent of Columbus is foreign-born. According to a recent study from the New American Economy, a nonprofit research-and-advocacy group, Columbus-area immigrants pay \$1.2 billion a year in taxes and have an annual spending power of \$3.2 billion. They work as doctors and engineers, open small businesses employing thousands, perform manual labor in warehouses and frequently do the jobs that many other Americans will not, like meatpacking.

SugarCreek is one of many meatpacking businesses nationwide that have

turned to refugees. Last spring, the company approached Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS), a Columbus refugee-resettlement agency. “They needed people,” said CRIS’s Marcus Gorman, who arranges employment for the newly resettled. “They had a lot of opportunities for entry-level workers, and they were accustomed to working with folks that spoke little to no English.” Now, Gorman said, about 65 of CRIS’s clients work at SugarCreek. Since Sebatutsi started last November, he has opted to work every day, which he said is the best part of the job. “There’s a lot of overtime, and you can make money.” But, he added, “that’s also the worst thing.” He is no longer able to join his family at church. All that pushing, slicing and packaging is repetitive, but it’s far better than life in Gihembe. “The kids can ask you for something, you cannot provide,” he said. “But here you work, you take care of your problems, you do something for yourself.”

Abe Streek is a contributing editor for Outside and a contributing writer for The California Sunday Magazine.



Guadalupe Guido, Dalton, Ga. • The Carpet Whisperer Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

7. Guadalupe Guido

Dalton, Ga. • The Carpet Whisperer

By Lizzie O'Leary

The warehouse where Guadalupe Guido works is so bright inside that it feels like noon no matter the time of day. Huge metal racks hold row after row of carpet that will be trucked from this plant in Dalton, Ga., all over the United States. Dalton calls itself the Carpet Capital of the World, and everyone in Guido's family — her mother, father, sister and herself — work for one of Dalton's carpet companies.

Guido, who is 23 and goes by Lupe, has been working at Engineered Floors for almost two years. She has risen quickly, starting on yarn machines, before driving a Hyster forklift, working as a production clerk and now serving as a tufting scheduler. She creates orders, dictating the type of yarn to use and how much footage of carpet each job will need. "Without this person," she said of her role, "there really is no show."

In the political sphere, manufacturing work is often associated with men, and specifically white men. But women have always worked in carpets in Dalton and at Engineered Floors. And Dalton is about 50 percent Latino, which is reflected in the work force here. Many people in the city came from Mexico in the 1970s and '80s to work in the industry, including Guido's parents, Jose and Martina.

Lupe Guido was born in Dalton and dreamed initially of becoming a lawyer. "I talk a lot," she said with a laugh. But at 18, she wanted independence and her own money and went to work at Mohawk Industries, one of the largest carpet companies in the city, where her mother still works. It was not what her parents had in mind. "When I was growing up, it was always: 'Go to school, go to school,' " she said. " 'You don't want to be working how I'm working.' "

But the carpet industry, like most of American manufacturing, has undergone radical changes. The hardest and most dangerous jobs are now performed by machines that are mostly run by computers, and those computers are watched over by people like Guido.

Engineered Floors is new in comparison to Mohawk or Shaw Industries, the two companies that have dominated Dalton for decades. But Guido has

been able to move up quickly. She earns \$15.50 an hour, up from \$11 an hour when she started in 2015. At the end of each year, she gets a \$500 bonus.

Guido said she would like to stay at Engineered Floors if she can. To do so requires vigilantly managing her time so that she can move up. She's awake at 6 a.m., clocks into her job at 7 and works a 10-hour shift until 5 p.m. After dinner with her fiancé, who also works in the carpet industry, Guido spends her nights studying for a bachelor's degree in human-resource management at Georgia Northwestern Technical College. One day, she wants to be a department manager or a plant manager. "The way I've been growing and growing," she said, "I don't want for that to stop."

Lizzie O'Leary is the host of the radio program "Marketplace Weekend." More reporting by O'Leary and the producer Eliza Mills about [the carpet industry](#) in Dalton, Ga., is on Marketplace Weekend.



Wendy Almada, Las Vegas • The Hotel Cleaner Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

8. Wendy Almada

Las Vegas • The Hotel Cleaner

By Amanda Fortini

Most mornings, Wendy Almada — a guest-room attendant, or G.R.A., at the Aria Resort and Casino on the Las Vegas Strip — puts on a pair of latex gloves and tackles the bathroom first. “I don’t like to do beds,” she said. “I like to clean bathrooms.” Next she yanks off the sheets, bags them and makes up the bed. She dusts, vacuums, empties the garbage. If a light bulb is out or the carpet needs to be shampooed, she puts in a work order. She scans the room for any last detail that she might have overlooked, then clocks out and moves on to the next one. She cleans 13 rooms a day, with suites counting as two or three.

Sometimes the job is that straightforward, but often she opens the door to find what all G.R.A.s dread: a “trashed” room. “They eat and they leave all the trash everywhere: cans, food,” she said, gesturing with her hands. She was seated at a folding table in a trailer parked in the lot of the Las Vegas Culinary Workers Union. “Especially the bachelor party. Oh, my God, those are bad.”

Because she is a member of the union, the job pays her \$17.65 an hour. The Culinary Workers Union Local 226, chartered in 1935, is the largest union in Nevada, representing 57,000 men and women from 167 countries (its membership is 56 percent Latino and 81 percent people of color), among them cooks, bartenders, cocktail servers, porters, bellmen and guest-room attendants. The average wage of a culinary-union worker is \$23 an hour, compared with the \$10 an hour made by a nonunionized Las Vegas hospitality worker or the \$6 an hour Almada, who is 42 and who moved to the United States from the Mexico border town of Agua Prieta (she got her green card when she was 11, and became a citizen when she was 22), was paid at her last job in a coffee-cup-making factory in Tucson.

She said she was fired from that job for taking two months’ maternity leave, which prompted her and her (now former) husband to move to Las Vegas. They had heard that there were jobs at the casinos, where 90 percent of the hospitality work force on the Strip belong to the culinary union. But it was only after they divorced and she needed to support herself and her three children that Almada applied for her job at the Aria.

That was six years ago. Almada enumerates all the ways that the job and its attendant union membership has improved her life: free health insurance and pharmacy benefits; a pension; job security; and soon a \$20,000 down payment she will use to buy her first house. Initially she didn't understand the benefits and regulations the union conferred. This is a common reason workers can still be taken advantage of, particularly those who don't speak English. For the past seven months, though, Almada has been on an extended, contractually allowed, union-sanctioned leave of absence to serve as an organizer at Mandalay Bay Casino; she is teaching other workers to read and understand their own contracts. "I never had these rights in Arizona," she said. "Because I had my little one, they fired me and nobody helped me. If I was working here with the union, that doesn't happen to me."

Amanda Fortini is a contributing editor at Elle magazine and a visiting lecturer at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.



Nate Awan, Boston • The Pipe Fitter Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

9. Nate Awan

Boston • The Pipe Fitter

By Carlo Rotella

From the job site in Roxbury where he works as a union pipe fitter, Nate Awan can see the building that once housed the Phillis Wheatley Middle School, from which he was expelled for fighting and other misbehavior. “That was back in my knucklehead time,” he said.

The fifth child of an overwhelmed single mother, Awan was kicked out of four schools and took a bullet in the shoulder before going to prison at 18 for trying to shoot a rival gang member. While serving a three-year sentence, he resolved that he would change his fate.

With the help of a former prosecutor who took an interest in his rehabilitation, Awan found his way into Operation Exit, a program founded in 2014 in which the city of Boston partners with unions to channel residents with criminal backgrounds into the trades. Having sampled carpentry, sheet-metal work and other options, Awan, who had always been fascinated by welding but doesn't like heights, chose pipe fitting over iron work.

There's plenty of politics in the building trades, but there's also an ethos of craft meritocracy. “It's not what you look like, it's what your clevis hangers look like,” Awan said, referring to the brackets used to support pipes. “All at the same level, nothing crooked. It's about your work ethic.” He's already planning to get his 5-year-old son into the local when he's old enough.

Awan, who is 28 and currently a second-year apprentice making \$30 an hour plus benefits, can become a journeyman in three years, and he looks forward to continuing up the scale of seniority and pay toward the top rate of \$50 or so an hour. He still lives near the Four Corners section of Dorchester where he grew up, but he's shopping for a house outside the city. “You come from no money for food, nothing, to where you're buying a house, buying a car,” he said. “Your son needs a school uniform, you can get him one.”

Boston's mayor, Martin Walsh, intends Operation Exit to enable this kind of transformation of prospects and consciousness. Walsh, who also grew

up in Dorchester and had his own troubles (a bullet grazed his leg) before putting his life on course in the building trades, says: “We’ve had 80 graduates come through this program, and we’re expanding from the building trades into coding and culinary arts. Some of these guys were impact players on the street. It has an effect.”

Programs that reduce crime by connecting offenders and potential offenders to meaningful work are getting more attention across the country. Some, like Operation Exit, focus on re-entry after prison; others, like the Chicago CRED initiative recently started by the Emerson Collective and Arne Duncan, the former U.S. secretary of education, try to reduce gun violence by teaching job and life skills to young men adrift from both school and the labor market. It takes a significant investment of time and resources to shift a life from a dead-end trajectory to a viable future in this way, but Awan testifies to the approach’s effectiveness. “I’m no surgeon or big-time prosecutor,” he said, “but for me — a product of his environment, taken from my mother at 9, incarcerated at 18, sweeping and mopping in the hole in prison for 19 cents an hour, living like a peasant — this here is a lottery ticket.”

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