

Good Company, Wrong Job

Why a Brand Is No Guarantee

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AUTHORS

Matt Sigelman, Shrinidhi Rao, Luke Chen, Gwynn Guilford, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Marie Groark



Introduction: Redrawing the Map to Economic Mobility

As the labor market becomes more dynamic and artificial intelligence reshapes work, effective career navigation becomes increasingly important to economic mobility. Workers are making more frequent and consequential career decisions over the course of their lives, and making those decisions well increasingly depends on high-quality information. Yet one of the most consequential questions these systems must help workers answer often receives too little attention: not simply what job someone should pursue, but where. Occupational choice is foundational, but only part of the equation. Employer quality and role-specific opportunity can be just as important in shaping wages, skill development, advancement, and long-term economic mobility.

In practice, career navigation has tended to answer the “where” question through a familiar shorthand: the corporate brand. Career counselors, workforce development professionals, educators, and job seekers have aimed for the “Best Places to Work,” assuming that a respected employer is more likely to offer strong wages, skill development, stability, and upward mobility.

That instinct is not wrong. As our analysis of the career histories of 12 million workers across 1,750 of America’s largest employers shows, companies differ meaningfully in how well they hire, train, promote, retain, and advance their people. Identifying “good companies” can be an important instrument of corporate practice: it allows firms to benchmark their performance, understand where they are leading or lagging, and assess whether their stated values are translating into better outcomes for workers overall.

But the question looks different from the worker’s side of the labor market. For job seekers — and for the counselors, educators, workforce professionals, and, increasingly, the AI-powered guidance systems that advise and prepare them — the question is not only whether a company is good in the aggregate. It is whether this company is good for the role they are targeting.

That distinction matters because a company is not a single, uniform experience. Large firms are collections of functions, teams, business units, and occupations that receive very different levels of investment and support. A company that is a launchpad for one group of workers can be a dead end for another. A strong overall average signals that a firm is more likely to offer good jobs, but it cannot tell a worker whether the specific role they are considering leads to advancement, stability, and long-term economic mobility.

The reverse is just as important. If good companies can contain weak jobs, then good jobs can also be found well beyond the small set of firms that appear on “best employer” lists. A brand-based map of opportunity is too narrow in both directions: it can overstate the promise of celebrated employers and understate the mobility available in less obvious places.

“ For workers, that is a hopeful finding. Opportunity is more widely distributed than conventional rankings suggest — but it only becomes visible when we look at worker outcomes, role by role.

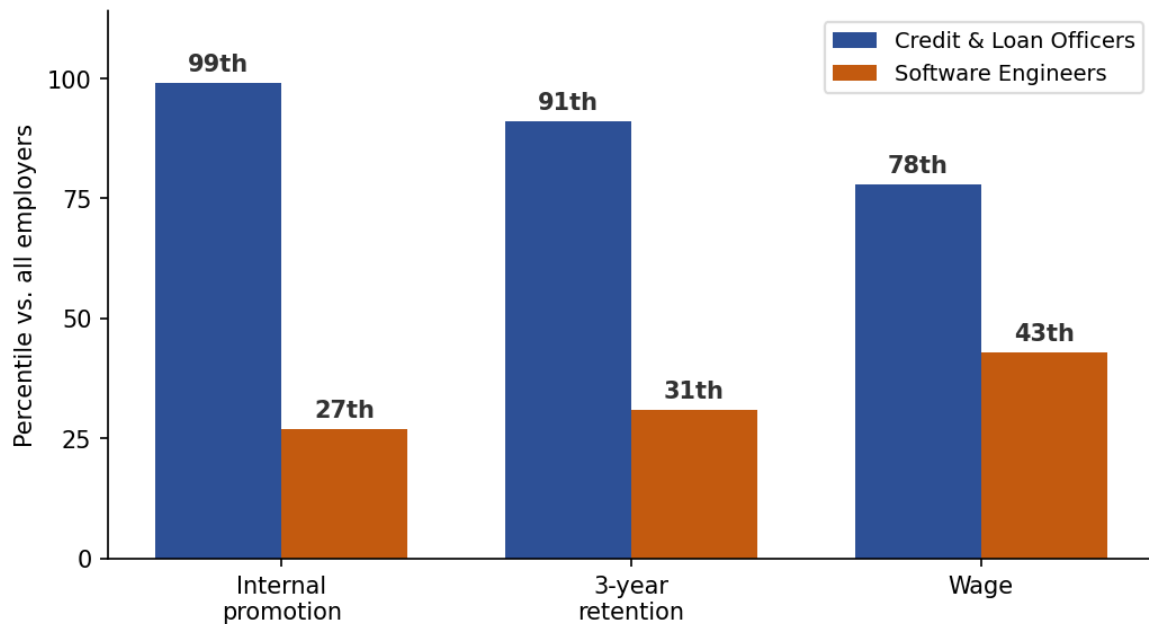
This report is intended to bring focus to that fuller map: not just which companies perform well overall, but where opportunity is actually found within them, role by role. To answer that question, we need to understand how well companies perform on average, how consistently they deliver opportunity across work groups, and what actually happens to workers in specific roles at specific firms.

Consistency is itself a measure of employer quality: it reveals whether policies and values are deeply embedded in day-to-day management systems or concentrated in a few favored parts of the organization.

The goal, then, is not to stop asking whether a company is good. It is to add a sharper and more useful set of questions: How evenly does a company deliver opportunity across its workforce? And is it a good company for the role a worker is actually targeting?

By tracking real-world outcomes rather than relying on employer reputation alone, this report points toward a stronger foundation for a new generation of career navigation tools and practices that incorporate employer quality alongside occupational choice, helping workers make more informed decisions about where they are most likely to achieve long-term economic mobility, while enabling employers to access essential intelligence around where to invest within their workforces to attract and retain talent.

One Firm, Different Realities: American Express



Source: Where You Work Matters · Burning Glass Institute / Schultz Family Foundation. Percentiles benchmark each company-cluster against all firms employing that cluster.

At American Express, the lending staff rank near the top, relative to other firms' lending staff, on promotion, retention, and pay, while the software engineers trail those at other firms on the same measures.

Key Findings

1 Brand is a signal, role is the test.

A strong employer brand can be a useful starting point – good companies are, on average, more likely to offer good jobs than weak ones – but the brand is an imperfect proxy for the experience any individual worker will have. On average, there is a massive 81-point percentile gap in outcomes between the highest- and lowest-performing roles inside the exact same firm. To put that in perspective: a worker in a top-performing role is on a fast track to rapid promotions and strong wages, while a colleague down the hall in a low-performing role faces near-total stagnation.

At Cigna, for example, actuaries reach a workforce-leading 99th percentile for promotion and the 92nd for retention, while business intelligence analysts languish at the 22nd. A worker's fate is decided less by the logo on their résumé than by the specific department and role they enter.

2 Target the “strategic core,” avoid the “overhead.”

The outcome gaps within companies are not random. Companies invest heavily in training, promoting, and retaining the workers who drive their core business, while systematically neglecting the roles they treat as support or “overhead.” Importantly, the roles that firms consider central to their success vary by firm and often

reflect firm strategy. For example, at Whole Foods, food preparation workers, key to the company's success in a high-margin market, do very well in a role that's often viewed as a low-mobility afterthought.

Effective career navigation requires understanding how a company values the role a worker is considering. Software engineering, for instance, is the strategic core of a tech firm but is often treated as overhead at a bank. The reverse is just as true: at American Express, credit and loan officers — the lifeblood of the business — sit in the ~top 20% for promotion and pay, while the company's software engineers rank in the bottom third.

3 Look at how widely opportunity is shared within a firm.

A company's overall performance is important, but its spread may be just as revealing. Some companies deliver opportunity consistently across many parts of the workforce. Others perform well on average because a handful of roles do extraordinarily well, while other workers experience far weaker mobility. Understanding a company's "spread" is therefore key to managing a job seeker's risk. A few brands do live up to an enterprise-wide promise — companies like Salesforce and John Deere have "tight" spreads and invest fairly evenly across almost every role. But most are far more uneven.

Companies like Lowe's and Delta Air Lines have "wide," bifurcated spreads: a handful of favored functions approach the 99th percentile — employees in these roles have a better experience than workers in the same roles pretty much anywhere else — while other parts of the workforce languish near the bottom. At these companies, the employer's brand is strong on average, but it guarantees little for workers in the wrong functions.

That spread is not just a statistical detail. It is a measure of how effectively a company translates policy into practice. A tight spread suggests that opportunity is embedded broadly in management systems, work processes, and expectations for talent development. A wide spread suggests that the company's values or investments may be real, but unevenly applied.

4 Hidden launchpads exist in unexpected places.

If career stagnation can hide inside a prestigious brand, then real opportunity can hide inside an ordinary one. Because opportunity is not monopolized by a handful of elite employers, there are far more pathways to mobility than a brand-based map suggests. Job seekers can identify faster advancement opportunities by looking beyond the obvious industry alignments.

Computer-security engineers at an insurer like Progressive, for example, are promoted at the 98th percentile — ahead of most dedicated tech firms — while marketing managers at a power-tool maker like Milwaukee Tool reach the 99th, outpacing peers at flashier consumer brands.

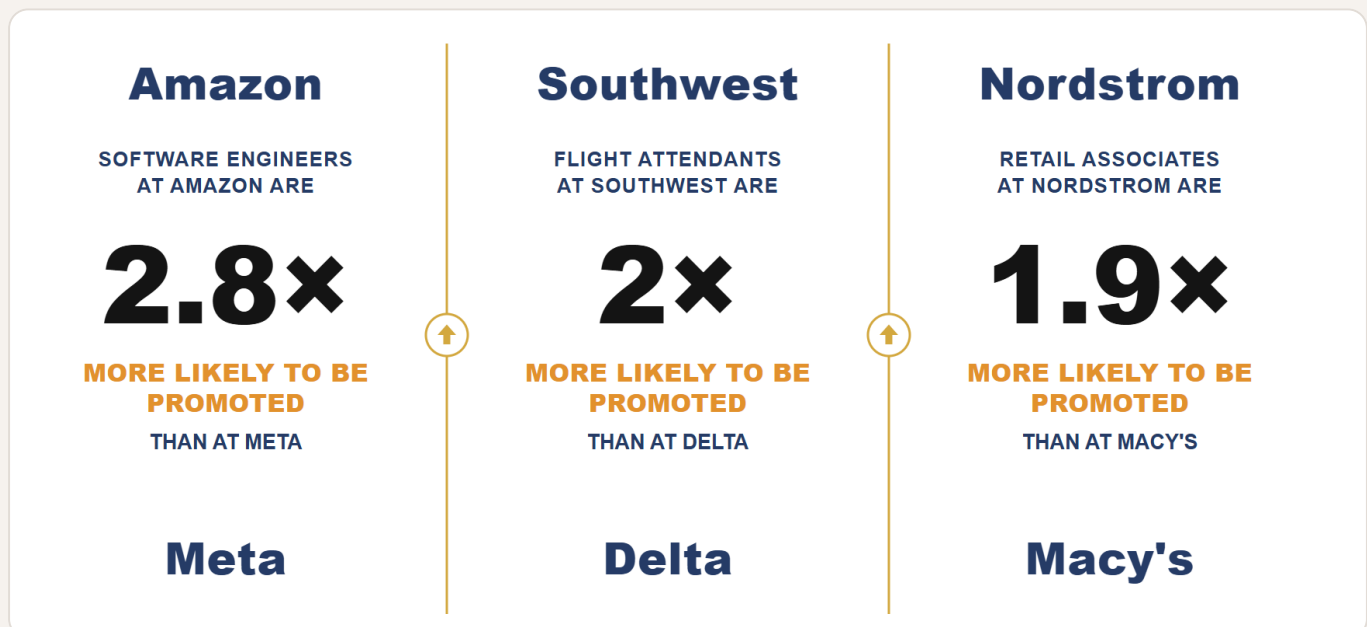
As career navigation becomes increasingly important in a labor market shaped by rapid technological change, employer quality deserves to become a core part of how workers evaluate opportunity.

“ To drive long-term economic mobility, the north star must be outcomes — and outcomes, this report finds, are decided less by the logo on the door than by which door inside the building a worker walks through.

Employer Quality Matters

Prior research from the Burning Glass Institute, in partnership with the Schultz Family Foundation, and the Harvard Business School Project on Managing the Future of Work, established a simple idea: corporate practice matters. Employers differ enormously in how they hire, train, promote, and retain their people — and those differences show up directly in how far workers actually get.

Take marketing managers. At PepsiCo, they are promoted nearly twice as often as at Coca-Cola — its direct competitor, drawing on the same talent at comparable pay. The same pattern turns up across the economy. Among airlines for example, Southwest promotes its flight attendants at twice the rate of Delta. Among department stores, Nordstrom's sales associates are promoted nearly twice as often as their peers at Macy's. The same workers, doing the same jobs, are sorted onto very different paths by the company that employs them.



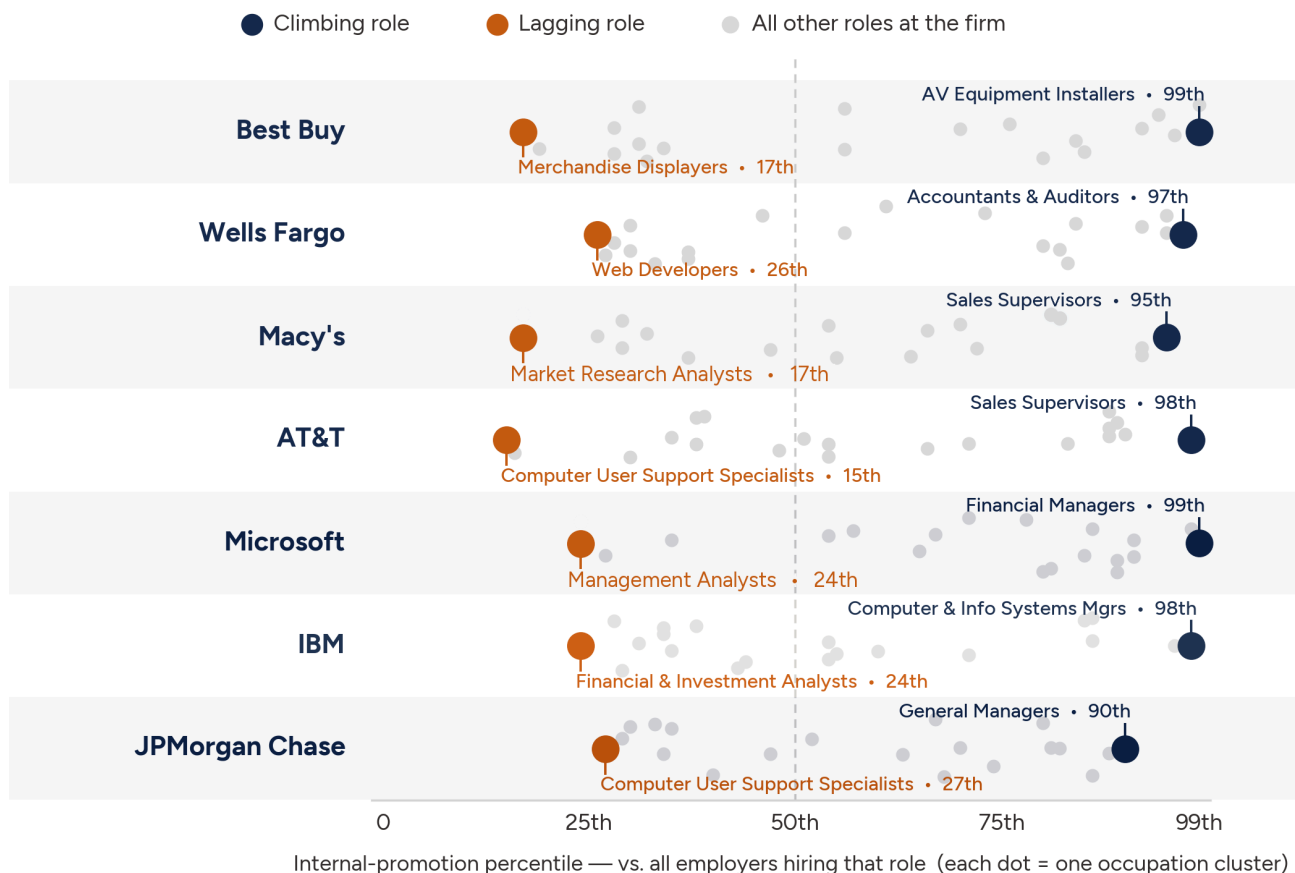
What separates these employers is a set of choices that rarely appear in a recruiting brochure: whether a company builds real internal ladders or hires its senior people from outside; whether it invests in a given role or treats it as interchangeable; whether managers are rewarded for developing their people or only for the work those people produce.

For a job seeker, the catch is that none of this is visible from the outside. Two offers from two respected rivals can look identical on paper — similar pay, similar prestige — yet one leads to a promotion and the other to a plateau. The worker cannot tell which is which — and neither can the people supporting and advising them.

The outcomes that matter most for mobility are invisible, so counselors are navigating without a compass. “Best places to work” lists offer a broad sense of which companies treat people well. But as the next section shows, a strong brand is no guarantee.

For Workers, There is No Such Thing as an “Average Experience”

A brand is no guarantee: the climbing role vs. the lowest rung



Source: Where You Work Matters · Burning Glass Institute / Schultz Family Foundation. Percentiles benchmark each company-occupation against all firms employing that occupation.

Some companies really are better places to work than others. But a company-wide average hides as much as it reveals, because it blends together workforces living in completely different realities.

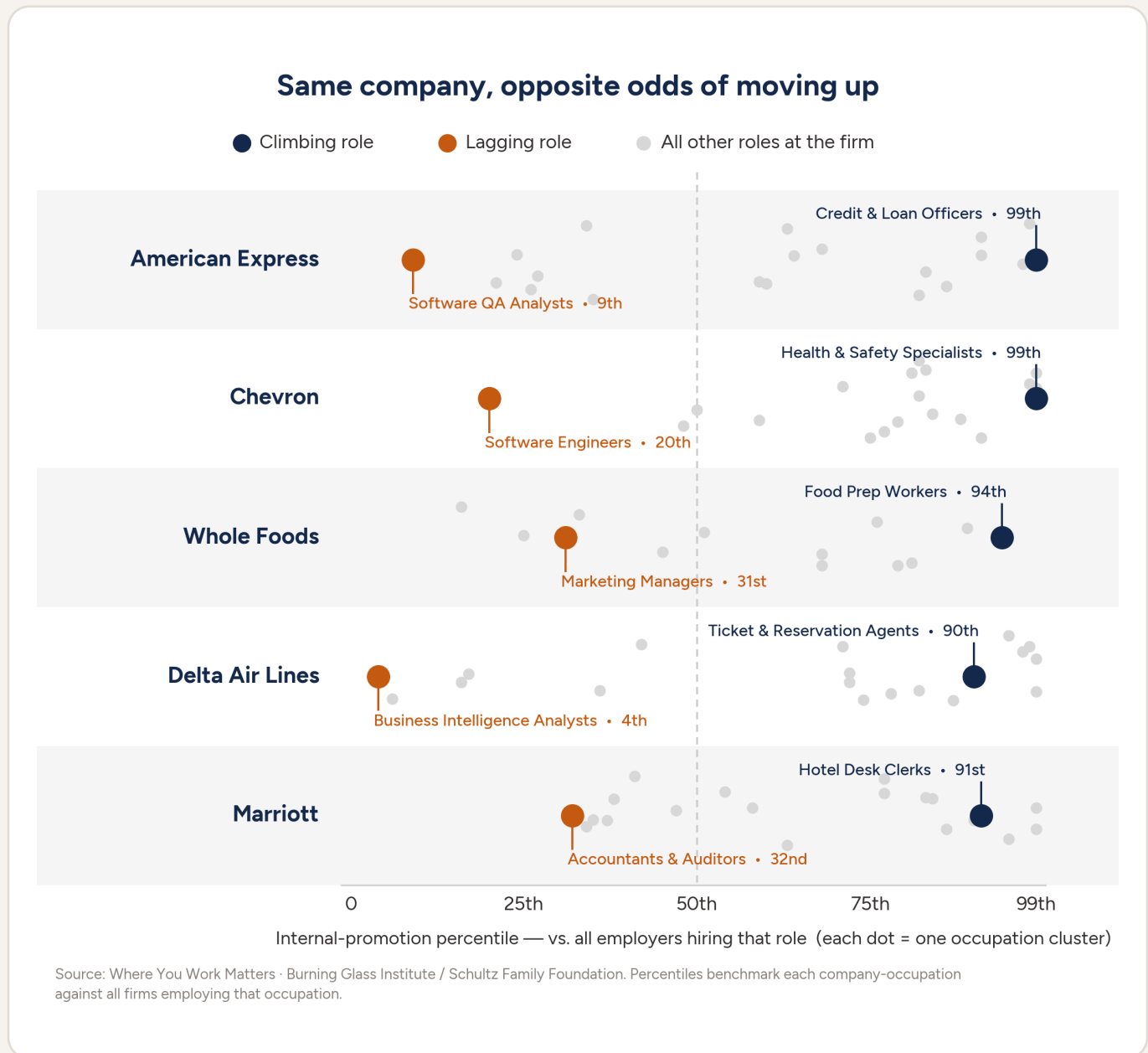
We have always known this about working conditions; no one confuses the warehouse floor with headquarters. What is new is that the same divide now shows up in measurable outcomes. Inside Wells Fargo, accountants are more likely to be promoted than 97 percent of other accountants in our dataset (i.e., at the 97th percentile), while the financial managers down the hall sit at the 30th.

At Accenture, IT systems analysts are promoted more often than 98 percent of their peers elsewhere, even as financial managers a few desks away sit at the 29th percentile – meaning they trail 7 in 10 of their peers. At Best Buy, the technicians who install home-theater systems hit the 99th percentile on our promotion metric while the customer service team sits at the 31st.

The same company, in other words, can be one of the best places in the country to build your career and one of the most frustrating — depending entirely on which team a worker joins.

WITHIN ONE EMPLOYER

the climbing role vs. the lagging role



These gaps are not random. They track a company's sense of its own strategic edge. The functions a firm sees as central to how it competes get additional investment; the ones it treats as overhead — however essential to daily operations — do not. The same job can be a crown jewel at one company and an afterthought at another: software engineering is the heart of a tech firm and, often, a back-office cost at a retailer.

This is why a single verdict on a company — good or bad — cannot fully capture the opportunity inside it. The employer that looks merely average may hold the best role in the country for a particular worker, even while the celebrated employer may, for that same worker, be a dead end.

Some Unexpected Places to Thrive

If stagnation can hide inside a strong brand, opportunity can hide inside an ordinary one.

Once you look at the right unit — not the occupation, not the employer, but the specific role at the specific company — opportunities show up in surprising places. Software engineers at Northwestern Mutual reach the 93rd percentile on promotion, at a company most people associate with actuaries and insurance agents. IT systems analysts at Liberty Mutual hit the 92nd percentile on retention, beating most dedicated tech employers.

Finance is another example. It is a career most people expect to build at a bank or an investment firm — yet some of the steadiest ladders run through manufacturing and food companies. Financial managers reach the 99th percentile on promotion at Nike and PepsiCo. At John Deere and Caterpillar, accountants are promoted and retained at the 99th percentile, outpacing peers at banks and the Big Four accounting firms. And yet far fewer young accountants are combing the tractor company's career pages for openings.

Pharmaceutical companies tell a similar story. You would assume they reward scientists above all, but two of their least technical functions are among the best-positioned anywhere. Regulatory-compliance managers — the people who shepherd drugs through approval — are promoted at the 99th percentile at Eli Lilly and the 95th at AbbVie. Marketing managers do nearly as well: the 91st percentile on promotion at AbbVie, and the 94th on promotion at Genentech, where they also rank in the 98th percentile on pay. These aren't accidental. Rather, they reflect the unspoken reality of big pharma, where promising therapies are acquired from startups and differentiation lies in the ability to bring new drugs to market.

Often, a less obvious employer faces more competition for a given kind of talent than a marquee name does — and wins that talent by offering what the marquee name will not: a clear path up, or real stability in a quiet corner of the field. Conversely, inside strong, admired employers, certain roles can lag the field; the workers in them carry a prestigious logo that has not actually paid off.

HIDDEN WEAK SPOTS

lagging roles inside strong-overall employers (promotion / retention percentile)

EMPLOYER (TOP-QUARTILE OVERALL)	LAGGING ROLE	PROMOTION	RETENTION
Microsoft	Software QA Analysts	35th	10th
IBM	IT Systems Analysts	35th	28th
Wells Fargo	Web Developers	26th	12th
ExxonMobil	Petroleum & Gas System Operators	26th	18th
Capital One	Web Developers	23rd	18th

Strength is never uniform, and neither is weakness. Judging a role by its company's brand can steer a worker straight into a dead end. These patterns have historically been invisible from the outside, which is exactly why role-level data matters. A worker pointed toward a standout role at an overlooked company can do far better than one sent to the flagship function of a marquee name.

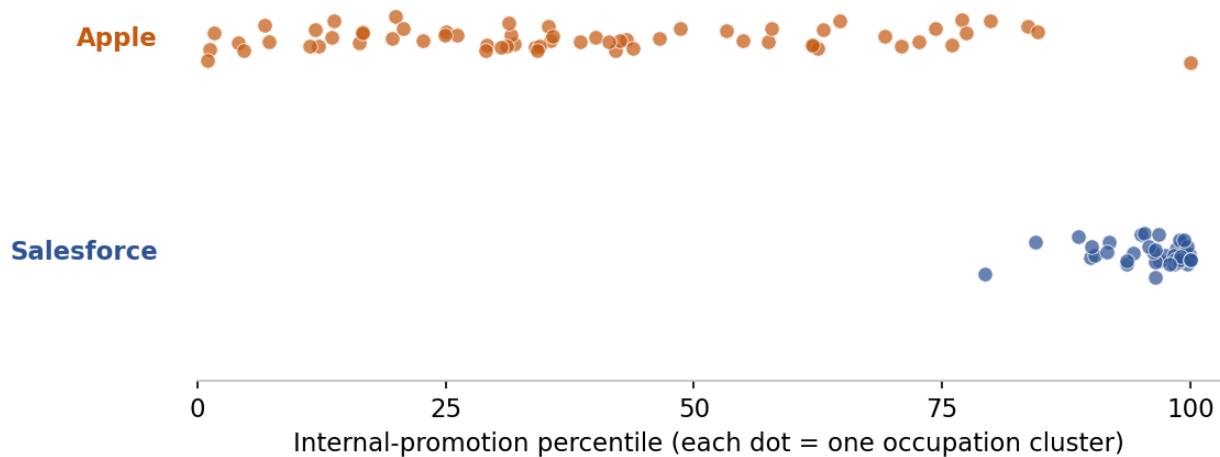
Opportunity Has a Shape

Understanding that opportunity varies this much inside a single firm should change the questions a counselor asks of young people. One of the most useful is simply this: how evenly does this company invest? How wide is the gap between its best and worst roles?

At Salesforce, every measured role falls between the 79th and 99th percentile for promotion; at John Deere, between the 69th and 99th. Wherever a worker lands in those companies, they have landed somewhere with real room to move up.

Most firms are far less even. At Apple and Delta — both fixtures on “best employer” lists — the range runs from floor to ceiling: a few favored functions near the top, large parts of the workforce near the bottom. With this as the reality at most firms, a worker's fate depends almost entirely on which side of the divide they fall. Many would be better off at a less famous employer that offers a stronger path for their particular role.

Two strategies: uniform investment vs. a bifurcated workforce



Source: Where You Work Matters · Burning Glass Institute / Schultz Family Foundation. Percentiles benchmark each company-cluster against all firms employing that cluster.

THE SHAPE OF OPPORTUNITY

promotion range across a company's roles

PATTERN	COMPANY	PROMOTION RANGE	SPREAD
TIGHT / UNIFORM	Salesforce	79th – 99th	20 pts
TIGHT / UNIFORM	John Deere	69th – 99th	30 pts
WIDE / BIFURCATED	Apple	≈1st – 99th	~99 pts
WIDE / BIFURCATED	Costco	≈1st – 99th	~99 pts
WIDE / BIFURCATED	Delta Air Lines	≈3rd – 99th	~96 pts

These spreads are no accident. They are a record of where a company has chosen to concentrate its investment and where it has decided workers are interchangeable. A tight, even spread means a company made uniform investments across functions; a wide one means it concentrated its bets and let the rest drift.

These spreads also demonstrate that company policies are not always evenly applied. The benefits a firm touts on its webpage may not make their way to the warehouse floor; the guidance the firm gives to managers around training and developing their teams may be unevenly delivered and less evenly enforced. Policies, in other words, are only as good as the people putting them into practice.

For workers and the people advising them, the lesson is that averages can be deceiving. In a tightly distributed company, managers are disciplined in translating policy into practice, and the brand really stands for something. In a widely distributed one, it's hit or miss whether the brand lives up to its promise.

Conclusion: A New Map for Economic Mobility

For years, career guidance turned on occupation: steer people toward safe bets like nursing or coding. More recently, employer-level outcomes have added an important second layer: where a person works matters too. As the labor market becomes more dynamic and workers navigate more frequent career transitions, understanding employer quality is becoming an increasingly important part of effective career navigation. Some companies build better ladders, promote more consistently, and retain workers more effectively than others.

But averages can deceive. The closer we look, the clearer it becomes that opportunity comes into sharper focus at the level of the role within the firm. And even there it has texture: the same job can be strong on one dimension — promoting workers rapidly, for instance — and weaker on another, such as stability or pay.

That is why a new generation of employer quality metrics has the potential to change career navigation. Employer-by-occupation insights, like those now available through Where You Work Matters, make visible patterns that in the past were at best the stuff of word-of-mouth: which employers actually advance workers in a given role, where pay is stronger, where retention is higher, and where an appealing brand may not translate into a better path. What once could only be inferred from alumni networks, informal reputation, or scattered anecdotes can now be measured directly from the career trajectories of millions of workers.

Those metrics should not be used mechanically. They are not a substitute for understanding a worker's goals, skills, constraints, geography, risk tolerance, or sense of fit. Instead, they should become part of a more holistic conversation: What roles is this worker targeting? Which employers have produced strong outcomes for people in those roles? Are those outcomes consistent across the firm, or concentrated in a few pockets? And how do the data line up with what the worker values most — advancement, stability, pay, learning, mission, flexibility, or long-term optionality?

The more precisely we can guide workers, the more likely they are to experience long-term economic mobility. That requires a layered view of opportunity that combines occupation, employer quality, consistency across the firm, and role-specific outcomes—not a singular focus on starting wage. Occupational data shows workers where a career can lead. Employer quality data helps them understand how much a company may help them get there. Role-level data shows them how that journey has proved out for others who have traveled that same road. Together, the three provide a far more complete map of opportunity than occupation or employer reputation alone.

These insights also have real value for employers. For those seeking to attract and retain talent in business-critical roles, understanding how they are performing at the occupation level versus key competitors is essential intelligence. But this carrot also comes with a stick: The recognition that job seekers and workers can now see occupation-level data should be an incentive for businesses to improve quality in underperforming roles.

Opportunity is not monopolized by a handful of prestigious employers. It is scattered widely across the U.S. economy: strong roles in modest firms, launchpads in unexpected industries, and overlooked pathways inside

companies many workers might never have considered. The task ahead is to make that map legible to the workers and counselors who need it.

Methodology

This report draws on Where You Work Matters, an independent, outcomes-based assessment of how well the largest U.S. employers advance, pay, and retain their workers. Unlike most “best places to work” measures, it does not rely on data supplied or self-reported by companies. Instead, it is built from observed employee outcomes, drawn predominantly from 2019 to 2024 across a range of sources — the professional profiles and résumés workers post to career sites such as LinkedIn, pay data from sites such as Glassdoor, and job-postings data from Lightcast. In total, the analysis observes roughly 12 million U.S. workers across 1,750 of America’s largest publicly traded, private, and nonprofit employers, where data sufficiency allows.

Workers at each company are grouped into occupation clusters, beginning with the U.S. Department of Labor’s O*NET taxonomy and further aggregating similar occupation groups. An occupation is measured only where there is a statistically significant pool of employee data; occupations too small to measure are excluded. To assess a firm, we require measurable data covering occupations that represent at least half of its workforce, based on the Burning Glass Institute’s statistical models of company composition.

For every occupation at every company, we calculate a set of career-progression metrics. This report foregrounds three: internal promotion (the likelihood of being promoted at least once within five years of starting in a role), retention (the share of workers who stay at least three years), and pay (how well workers are compensated relative to the same occupation elsewhere).

Each metric is benchmarked against that same occupation and metric across all companies in the dataset — retention for customer-service representatives at Company X is compared with retention for customer-service representatives, etc. These benchmarked values are standardized as z-scores and expressed as percentiles. A role at the 90th percentile therefore outperforms that same role at 90 percent of other employers. We also describe each company’s “spread” as the gap between its highest- and lowest-performing roles on a given metric.

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