

Job Postings as Gatekeeping Mechanisms: An Intersectional Analysis of Workforce Access in CTE-Aligned Industries

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Abstract

Job postings are often treated as neutral descriptions of work; however, they function as powerful signals that shape access to employment. This study examines how job postings embed implicit assumptions about the “ideal worker” and how these assumptions may act as intersectional barriers to workforce entry. Using qualitative content analysis, a purposive sample of 20 job postings across healthcare, skilled trades, and information technology was analyzed using an original Intersectional Job Posting Analysis Framework, a seven-category coding rubric developed from existing research on hiring practices, intersectionality theory, and the “ideal worker” construct. This framework represents a methodological contribution that may be adapted and extended in future workforce equity research. Findings indicate that postings exhibited elevated mean scores across categories related to time flexibility, experience requirements, and credential expectations, with meaningful variation across the three industries examined. Notably, roles positioned as entry-level frequently included prior experience requirements, suggesting a persistent misalignment between workforce entry points and practical accessibility. Additionally, inclusion-oriented language was largely absent across postings. The study argues that job postings function as gatekeeping mechanisms: organizational texts that selectively regulate workforce access by embedding structural assumptions not equally distributed across applicant populations. Implications for CTE program design, Perkins V accountability frameworks, and equity-focused employer engagement are discussed, including concrete recommendations for posting literacy curricula and inclusive hiring standards in CTE-aligned industries.

Keywords: job postings, gatekeeping, intersectionality, career and technical education, workforce equity, ideal worker, hiring practices, labor market access

Introduction

Job postings are often treated as neutral artifacts within labor markets, serving as routine descriptions of duties, qualifications, and organizational expectations. However, research suggests that job advertisements function as signaling mechanisms that shape applicant perceptions of fit, belonging, and likelihood of success (Gaucher et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). As such, job postings play a critical yet underexamined role in structuring access to employment opportunities.

Within career and technical education (CTE) and workforce development systems, this gap is particularly consequential. While policy frameworks such as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) emphasize equitable access and outcomes for special populations (Pub. L. No. 115-224, 2018), less attention has been given to the labor market signals encountered as learners transition from education to employment. Job postings represent a critical interface between training systems and workforce entry, yet they remain largely absent from discussions of accountability, equity, and program alignment.

CTE programs serve a diverse population of learners, including individuals from low-income backgrounds, single parents, adults returning to the workforce, English language learners, and students with disabilities (Advance CTE & ACTE, 2023; Pub. L. No. 115-224, 2018). These learners, often described in the literature as the “new majority” of postsecondary students, disproportionately rely on CTE as a pathway to economic stability and career advancement (Spaulding & Sirois, 2022). Research has documented that CTE participation can improve workforce outcomes, with Brunner et al. (2023) finding significantly higher earnings and graduation rates for male students attending stand-alone technical high schools. However, this evidence base focuses largely on in-program outcomes such as completion, credential attainment, and early wage gains. Far less attention has been paid to what happens at the moment of labor market entry, when CTE graduates encounter the actual language and expectations of job postings in their field. Understanding the accessibility of job postings in CTE-aligned industries is therefore essential not only to measuring equitable outcomes but also to designing employer engagement strategies, career advising frameworks, and program curricula that prepare learners for the structural realities of the labor market transition.

While emerging research has documented bias in job posting language (including gendered wording and credential inflation), much of this work examines disparities along a single dimension of identity at a time (Gaucher et al., 2011; Modestino et al., 2020). This study takes a different approach, applying an intersectional lens (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) to examine how overlapping constraints embedded in job postings may compound to produce layered exclusion. Drawing further on the concept of the “ideal worker” (Acker, 1990) and theories of organizational gatekeeping, this research argues that job postings are not neutral administrative documents but consequential texts that actively shape who perceives themselves as qualified to participate in the labor market.

Literature Review

Job Postings as Labor Market Signals

Job postings have traditionally been understood as informational tools; however, research in labor economics and organizational studies suggests they function as signals that shape applicant behavior and labor market outcomes (Spence, 1973). Signaling theory posits that employers use job advertisements to communicate organizational expectations, and that applicants use these signals to assess their perceived fit and likelihood of success (Spence, 1973). Job advertisements

thus communicate not only required skills and qualifications but also implicit expectations about who belongs within an organization.

Bias and Language in Job Advertisements

A growing body of research has examined how job-posting language influences applicant perceptions and participation. Gaucher et al. (2011) found that gendered wording in job advertisements can discourage women from applying, demonstrating that even subtle linguistic choices carry exclusionary potential. More recent studies have identified patterns of credential inflation and shifting skill requirements, with employers frequently raising educational and experiential thresholds beyond what job tasks demand (Fuller & Raman, 2017; Modestino et al., 2020). These studies suggest that job postings may function as more than neutral informational artifacts, and that the social and structural signals embedded within them may shape who self-selects into the applicant pool.

Intersectionality and Workforce Access

While prior research has identified disparities in hiring practices, much of this work remains limited to single-axis analyses that examine one dimension of identity, such as gender or race, at a time. Intersectionality provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how overlapping identities and structural conditions shape access to opportunity (Bowleg, 2012; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Originally articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in the context of race and gender, intersectionality has since been applied across disciplines to illuminate how systems of advantage and disadvantage interact and compound. Within workforce contexts, this perspective highlights how structural barriers may accumulate for individuals navigating multiple, simultaneous constraints, such as caregiving responsibilities, limited transportation, or nonlinear employment histories.

The “Ideal Worker” Norm

The concept of the “ideal worker,” as articulated by Acker (1990), provides a critical lens for understanding how workplace expectations are constructed and embedded in organizational practices. The ideal worker is assumed to be fully available, unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities, and able to demonstrate continuous employment and commitment. This norm, Acker argued, is not incidental but is systematically reproduced through the structures of organizations, including hiring documents and job descriptions. When job postings embed expectations aligned with this norm, they implicitly communicate that applicants who deviate from it, such as single parents, low-income workers, or career changers, are less suitable candidates. This framework connects directly to intersectionality by revealing how multiple, intersecting identities may place individuals outside the bounds of the ideal worker model.

CTE Learners and the Labor Market Transition

A growing body of research has examined the workforce outcomes associated with CTE participation. Brunner et al. (2023) found that attendance at stand-alone technical high schools

was associated with significantly higher earnings for male students, as well as improved high school graduation rates. Research by the Urban Institute further documents that postsecondary CTE programs can provide pathways to economic stability for new majority learners, particularly when programs are well-aligned with local labor market demand and designed with equity-centered employer engagement (Spaulding & Sirois, 2022). Despite these documented benefits, scholars have also noted persistent gaps between program completion and labor market success, particularly for learners from low-income backgrounds and those navigating multiple intersecting barriers (Spaulding & Sirois, 2022). The Perkins V legislation acknowledges this by requiring local recipients to complete a Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) that considers student performance disaggregated by special population status, including individuals from economically disadvantaged families, single parents, students with disabilities, and out-of-workforce individuals (Pub. L. No. 115-224, 2018). However, the CLNA framework does not extend to the structure of labor market opportunities into which CTE graduates transition.

Employer engagement has emerged as a central strategy in CTE reform efforts, with NASDCTEc (2014) documenting that state CTE directors widely report increased employer involvement in program design, curriculum validation, and work-based learning over the past decade. However, existing models of employer engagement in CTE focus primarily on the development of curriculum-industry alignment and work-based learning opportunities, with limited attention to hiring practices or the accessibility of job postings as a downstream equity concern (NASDCTEc, 2014; Lewy, 2021). This gap is significant: even when CTE programs successfully prepare learners with relevant skills and industry credentials, labor market entry remains mediated by employer hiring documents that may embed assumptions incompatible with the lived realities of the populations CTE is designed to serve. Job postings, as the primary public-facing signal of employer expectations, represent an underexamined site of potential misalignment between CTE equity goals and labor market access.

Gatekeeping in Workforce and Organizational Contexts

The concept of gatekeeping has been theorized across multiple disciplinary traditions, from communication studies to organizational sociology, yet its application to labor market access and hiring practices remains underdeveloped. Originally developed by Lewin (1947) to describe how individuals in positions of institutional authority regulate the flow of information or resources through defined channels, gatekeeping has since been extended to describe how social structures, not only individuals, determine whose access to opportunity is facilitated or blocked (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In workforce contexts, gatekeeping refers to the mechanisms, both formal and informal, explicit and embedded, through which access to employment is selectively structured. These mechanisms include hiring criteria, credential requirements, interview processes, and, critically, the language and expectations embedded in job postings themselves.

Sociological perspectives on gatekeeping emphasize its role in reproducing existing power relations and social hierarchies. Rivera (2015) demonstrated that elite hiring practices function as gatekeeping mechanisms that systematically favor candidates who reflect the cultural backgrounds of those already within institutions, not simply those with the highest competencies. Similarly, Tilly (1998) argued that categorical inequality, understood as the systematic exclusion

of groups based on ascribed characteristics, is sustained not through individual prejudice alone but through organizational routines and boundary-drawing practices. Job postings, in this view, function as boundary objects: they define who belongs within a role before any candidate interaction occurs.

In labor market research, scholars have examined how credential requirements, screening mechanisms, and application barriers differentially filter the applicant pool, with documented effects across race, gender, and class (Moss & Tilly, 2001; Pager & Shepherd, 2008). This body of work reveals that gatekeeping operates at multiple stages of the hiring process, from initial job advertisement through interview and selection, and that the cumulative effect of these filters is neither random nor neutral. When analyzed through an intersectional lens, these gatekeeping mechanisms may not affect all applicants equally; rather, they may interact with the social positions of applicants to produce differential exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991). An individual navigating caregiving responsibilities, limited transportation, and a non-linear work history may encounter each requirement in isolation as a manageable challenge, but in combination, these expectations may constitute a compounded structural barrier.

This study adopts an integrated definition of gatekeeping that draws on both sociological and labor market traditions: gatekeeping is understood as the process by which organizational texts, norms, and structures regulate access to employment by embedding assumptions about the ideal applicant that are differentially constraining across social positions. Job postings function as gatekeeping mechanisms in this sense not because they are designed to exclude, but because the assumptions they reflect, regarding availability, credentials, mobility, and professional identity, are socially located in ways that systematically advantage some applicants over others. Within CTE-aligned industries, where programs are explicitly designed to expand workforce access for diverse and historically underserved populations, understanding how job postings function as gatekeeping texts is essential to evaluating whether educational equity at the program level translates into equitable access at the labor market entry point. A further dimension of this concern involves the relationship between organizational rhetoric and structural practice. Scholars have documented that organizations frequently adopt formal diversity commitments, including equal opportunity statements and inclusive hiring language, as signals of institutional legitimacy, while the underlying structures and practices that govern access remain largely unchanged (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This decoupling between stated equity commitments and embedded structural assumptions represents a particularly consequential dynamic in the context of job postings, where surface-level inclusion language may coexist with requirements that systematically narrow the eligible applicant pool.

Research Questions

Primary Research Questions

The following served as the primary research questions for this study:

1. How do job postings across CTE-aligned industries embed implicit assumptions about the “ideal worker” through their language, requirements, and structural expectations?

2. In what ways do these embedded assumptions function as intersectional gatekeeping mechanisms that may differentially constrain workforce access across applicant populations?

Secondary Research Questions

Secondary research questions were as follows:

1. How are expectations related to time, mobility, experience, and workplace culture represented in job postings across CTE-aligned industries?
2. In what ways might these expectations disproportionately impact individuals at the intersection of multiple identities (e.g., single parents, low-income individuals, nontraditional learners)?
3. To what extent do job postings align with or contradict equity goals outlined in workforce development frameworks such as Perkins V?
4. What implications do these findings have for CTE program design, workforce preparation, and equitable access to employment?

Method

Research Design

This study employed qualitative content analysis to examine how job postings embed implicit assumptions about applicants and how those assumptions may function as intersectional barriers to employment access. Qualitative content analysis was selected because it enables systematic examination of textual data while preserving the contextual meaning of language, tone, and structure within job advertisements (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). Rather than treating job postings as neutral descriptions of work, this study conceptualizes them as gatekeeping texts that communicate both explicit requirements and implicit expectations about the “ideal applicant” (Acker, 1990; Gaucher et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). The analysis was guided by an intersectional framework emphasizing how overlapping identities and structural conditions shape access to opportunity (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991).

Data Collection

A purposive sample of 20 job postings was collected from two publicly accessible online job boards, Indeed and LinkedIn. Postings were selected across three career fields aligned with CTE pathways: healthcare, skilled trades/advanced manufacturing, and information technology. These fields were selected due to their prominence in workforce development initiatives and their relevance to diverse learner populations within CTE systems. This study is explicitly exploratory in scope, designed to develop and pilot an intersectional coding framework rather than to produce statistically generalizable findings. Consistent with this intent, the search was purposefully bounded rather than intended to capture every available posting nationwide; the goal was to assemble a diverse and analytically useful set of postings across industries, role levels, and geographic regions, not to exhaust the universe of available listings. The sample size of 20 postings is consistent with the goals of exploratory qualitative content analysis oriented toward framework development rather than generalization (Schreier, 2012). The corpus was

intentionally bounded to pilot and illustrate the coding instrument across three distinct industry contexts, not to draw frequency-based conclusions about the population of CTE-aligned job postings. The purpose of this study is to develop, demonstrate, and assess the analytic utility of the Intersectional Job Posting Analysis Framework as a tool for future research at larger scale.

Postings were selected with attention to three guiding criteria: (1) industry representation, with postings distributed across all three CTE-aligned fields; (2) role-level variation, with both entry-level and early-career positions included within each industry; and (3) descriptive sufficiency, with only postings that included a detailed job description, explicit qualification requirements, and stated expectations retained for coding. Postings that lacked sufficient detail to support systematic coding were set aside. Search terms included role titles paired with industry keywords (e.g., “medical assistant,” “electrician apprentice,” “help desk technician”). To introduce geographic variation, searches were conducted across multiple U.S. regions by rotating location inputs, including metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas across the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. This approach was intended to capture variation in how posting language and requirements may differ across regional labor markets, rather than to produce a nationally representative sample. Because this study employed purposive rather than exhaustive sampling, searches concluded once the predetermined sampling criteria were satisfied and additional postings were no longer contributing meaningful variation across industries, role levels, and geographic regions. The final sample of 20 postings (seven from healthcare, seven from skilled trades, and six from information technology) was selected when the researcher determined that sufficient variation in role type and posting content had been achieved across the three industries. While not intended to be representative of the broader population of job postings in these fields, the sample provides a structured and purposefully assembled dataset for examining how job postings may function as intersectional gatekeeping mechanisms, and for piloting a coding framework that future research can apply at larger scale.

Table 1
Sample Description of Job Postings

Industry	Number of Postings	Example Roles
Healthcare	7	Medical Assistant, CNA, Phlebotomist
Skilled Trades/Advanced Manufacturing	7	HVAC Technician, Electrician, Apprentice Welder
Information Technology	6	Help Desk Analyst, Network Technician, IT Support Specialist

Note. Sample includes entry-level and early-career roles across CTE-aligned pathways drawn from Indeed and LinkedIn.

Table 2
Mean Category Scores by Industry

Coding Category	Healthcare (n = 7)	Skilled Trades (n = 7)	Information Technology (n = 6)	Full Sample (n = 20)
1. Time Expectations	1.86	1.71	1.17	1.60
2. Mobility Requirements	1.14	1.86	0.83	1.30
3. Experience Pathway Assumptions	1.57	1.71	1.83	1.70
4. Credential & Access Expectations	1.71	1.57	1.83	1.70
5. Cultural Fit & Normative Professionalism	1.29	1.57	1.17	1.35
6. Hidden Resource Assumptions	1.00	1.71	0.67	1.15
7. Inclusion & Support Signals (absence as barrier)	1.71	1.86	1.50	1.70

Note. Table 2 presents descriptive mean category scores by industry and for the full purposive sample. Scores reflect a 0–2 rubric applied consistently across all seven categories: higher scores indicate greater structural constraint. For Category 7 (Inclusion and Support Signals), the scale is applied to the absence of inclusive features so that higher scores likewise indicate greater barrier contribution. Overall high/moderate classifications were not retained because the available data support category-level comparisons rather than verified posting-level summary classifications.

Table 2 presents mean category scores across the three industries. Time expectations (Category 1) emerged as the most consistently elevated barrier across all sectors, with healthcare and skilled trades postings showing the highest mean scores. Mobility requirements (Category 2) were most pronounced in skilled trades, reflecting the frequent co-occurrence of transportation and physical access expectations in that sector. Experience pathway assumptions (Category 3) and credential expectations (Category 4) were elevated across all industries, with IT postings showing slightly higher scores on credential requirements relative to time expectations, consistent with the pattern of technical certification demands observed in that sector. The absence of inclusion and support signals (Category 7) was notable across all three industries, with skilled trades postings exhibiting the highest mean score, indicating the greatest absence of these features. These distributional patterns provide quantitative texture to the qualitative findings discussed in subsequent sections.

Coding Framework

Data were analyzed using a structured coding rubric, the *Intersectional Job Posting Analysis Framework*, developed from existing research on hiring practices, workforce access, and bias in job postings (Acker, 1990; Gaucher et al., 2011; Modestino et al., 2020) and further informed by an intersectional lens emphasizing structural constraints (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991). Each job posting was coded across seven primary categories: (1) time expectations, (2) mobility and transportation requirements, (3) experience pathway assumptions, (4) credential and access expectations, (5) cultural fit and normative professionalism, (6) hidden resource assumptions, and (7) inclusion, flexibility, and support signals.

Each category was scored on a scale from 0 to 2, where 0 indicated minimal or no barrier, 1 indicated moderate presence of the feature, and 2 indicated strong or potentially exclusionary assumptions.

Coding Procedures and Trustworthiness

All job postings were imported into a structured coding matrix. The researcher conducted an initial read-through of each posting to develop familiarity with the data and identify preliminary patterns, followed by systematic coding using the established rubric. Analytic memos were recorded throughout to capture emerging insights, document decision-making, and note patterns across industries and role levels.

This study utilized a single-coder approach. To enhance consistency and rigor, a structured coding rubric with clearly defined categories and anchor examples was applied systematically across all postings. Analytic memos ensured transparency in interpretation. While intercoder reliability was not calculated, this approach aligns with qualitative content analysis traditions that prioritize depth, reflexivity, and systematic procedure in single-researcher designs (Schreier, 2012). The explicit grounding of coding categories in both established literature and intersectionality theory further strengthens the conceptual validity of the analysis. To address trustworthiness systematically, this study employed four strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor. First, credibility was enhanced through multiple coding passes: each posting was read three times, with the first pass dedicated to familiarization, the second to systematic scoring against the rubric, and the third to interpretive notation and analytic memo writing. Second, dependability was supported through a structured audit trail, including analytic memos documenting scoring decisions and an a priori rubric developed from established theoretical and empirical literature before any coding began. Third, confirmability was addressed through theoretical transparency: the coding framework and its grounding in intersectionality theory and the ideal worker construct are fully documented, enabling future researchers to replicate or critically engage with the analytical approach. Fourth, transferability is supported through thick description of the sample, the coding procedures, and the analytic process, enabling readers to assess the degree to which findings may be applicable to related contexts. The absence of a multicoder design is acknowledged as a limitation of this exploratory work. Future research should apply the framework with multiple coders and calculate intercoder reliability to strengthen the dependability of the analytic approach. Limitations of this approach include the relatively small and purposive sample, which restricts generalizability. Additionally, job postings represent only one stage of the hiring process and

may not fully reflect actual hiring practices or workplace conditions. Despite these limitations, the study provides a meaningful exploratory framework for examining job postings as intersectional gatekeeping mechanisms.

A further limitation relates to the sensitivity of the coding rubric itself. Because the framework is designed to identify the presence of structural constraints across multiple categories, it may be calibrated in a way that increases the likelihood of identifying at least moderate barriers in most postings. While this sensitivity is analytically useful for detecting embedded assumptions, it also raises the possibility that the framework privileges identification over differentiation.

Researcher Positionality

Reflexivity is a foundational commitment in qualitative research, and particularly in studies employing an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1991). As the sole researcher on this project, my positionality inevitably shaped the questions I asked, the categories I constructed, and the interpretations I drew from the data. My professional background in CTE and workforce development informed my attentiveness to the labor market transition as a site of structural inequality and gave me a working familiarity with the industries and role types examined in this sample. At the same time, this proximity to the field may have oriented my interpretive lens toward a critical reading of posting language as a site of structural constraint—a perspective that is theoretically grounded but not value-neutral, and that warrants acknowledgment. I approached the analysis with the assumption that equity and access are structural, not individual, concerns. Readers should interpret the findings with awareness that the coding rubric, while developed from existing literature, reflects choices about what counts as a barrier that are themselves shaped by this orientation. This does not undermine the validity of the findings, but it does call for interpretive humility and invites future researchers to engage with the framework critically and iteratively.

Data Analysis

Following coding, data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive and thematic approaches. Category scores were first reviewed to identify the frequency and intensity of specific types of expectations across postings. Patterns were then examined across industries and job levels to determine whether certain sectors exhibited more pronounced intersectional barriers. Finally, analytic memos were synthesized to identify broader themes related to how job postings construct the “ideal worker.” This phase emphasized the intersection of constraints across categories within individual postings, consistent with the study’s theoretical framing. Descriptive counts of coded category frequencies were incorporated to strengthen analytic transparency and support cross-case comparison.

Findings and Analysis

Patterns of Structural Constraints Across Postings

Analysis of the 20 job postings revealed consistently moderate to elevated constraint scores across all seven coding categories. Mean category scores ranged from 1.15 (Hidden Resource Assumptions) to 1.70 (Experience Pathway Assumptions, Credential Expectations, and Inclusion Signal Absence) across the full sample, indicating that structural assumptions were present to some degree in the large majority of postings. Overall high/moderate classifications are not reported here because the available data support category-level comparisons rather than verified posting-level summary ratings. Within this exploratory sample, postings frequently embedded multiple overlapping expectations that may limit access for applicants whose life circumstances do not align with dominant workforce assumptions. These patterns are illustrative and not intended to be generalized beyond the sample, but they suggest productive directions for further investigation.

Time Expectations and the “Always Available” Worker

Time-related expectations emerged as one of the most consistent and influential barriers across postings. Many postings included requirements such as evening, weekend, or on-call availability. These expectations were particularly pronounced in healthcare and skilled trades positions, where extended or irregular scheduling was often presented as standard. For example, healthcare postings frequently included language such as *“must be available for rotating shifts including evenings and weekends”* (JP1), while skilled trades postings commonly required *“flexibility to work overtime as needed, including nights and weekends”* (JP7). These excerpts illustrate how temporal expectations are explicitly embedded within posting language rather than inferred from analysis alone. Postings rarely acknowledged these scheduling demands or offered alternatives such as predictable scheduling or flexible arrangements. Instead, flexibility was framed as a non-negotiable requirement rather than a supported condition.

This pattern reflects a broader workforce norm in which the “ideal worker” (Acker, 1990) is implicitly constructed as unencumbered by external responsibilities and fully available on the employer’s terms. From an intersectional perspective (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991), these expectations may disproportionately affect individuals with caregiving responsibilities, those working multiple jobs, or those reliant on structured transportation systems. The temporal demands embedded in these postings extend well beyond standard scheduling and are rarely accompanied by acknowledgment of flexibility, support structures, or alternative arrangements.

Entry-Level Misalignment, Experience Requirements, and Credential Inflation

A key finding of this analysis is the disconnect between job classification and actual accessibility. Several postings labeled as entry-level or near-entry roles nonetheless included high-barrier characteristics, particularly in relation to experience requirements, credential expectations, and time flexibility. Postings positioned as entry-level frequently included experience requirements ranging from one to three years, suggesting a persistent misalignment between role classification and practical accessibility.

For example, postings such as JP1 (Medical Assistant), JP7 (Apprentice Electrician), and JP9 (Help Desk Analyst) each required prior experience despite being labeled entry-level. JP9, for

instance, specified “*minimum of 2 years of help desk or technical support experience required,*” while JP7 required “*previous hands-on electrical experience preferred, apprenticeship hours a plus.*” These excerpts suggest that entry-level labeling does not necessarily correspond to reduced barriers and may obscure persistent structural expectations embedded within posting language. This pattern is consistent with what Modestino et al. (2020) documented as opportunistic upskilling, a tendency for employers to raise education and experience requirements beyond what job performance demands. The expectation of continuous, linear career progression was evident throughout these postings, with requirements narrowly defined by role type and industry, and little recognition of transferable skills, community-based experience, or non-linear pathways. This absence of alternative pathway language further reinforces the assumption that the most qualified candidates are those who have followed uninterrupted, conventional career trajectories, a standard that disproportionately disadvantages career changers, those re-entering the workforce after caregiving, and CTE learners who lack continuous work histories despite having completed structured training programs.

Credential requirements contributed to this pattern. Postings frequently included degree requirements, certifications, or licensure expectations not clearly tied to job tasks, with multiple cases requiring a “Bachelor’s degree” or specific industry certifications even when job responsibilities suggested that skills-based experience may have been equally relevant. This reflects broader trends of credential inflation documented in the hiring literature (Fuller & Raman, 2017; Modestino et al., 2020). From an intersectional standpoint, such inflation may function as a structural barrier for individuals with limited access to higher education, financial resources, or formal training pathways. Postings rarely acknowledged experiential learning, community-based training, or adjacent field experience as legitimate preparation, reinforcing a narrow and exclusionary definition of qualification.

Cultural Fit and the Language of Belonging

A further pattern involved language that signaled cultural expectations and implicit norms of professional identity. This included masculine-coded descriptors such as “competitive” and “assertive,” which Gaucher et al. (2011) found can discourage women from applying, and which may similarly signal cultural exclusion to other nontraditional applicants, as well as broader cultural-fit language such as “fast-paced,” “high-energy,” “self-starter,” and “rockstar.” While these descriptors may appear benign, they often lack clear operational definitions and function as implicit signals about who belongs. Such language may advantage applicants already familiar with dominant workplace norms while disadvantaging those from different cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

The emphasis on organizational “fit” was rarely accompanied by explicit commitments to inclusion (Gaucher et al., 2011). Only four of the 20 postings included meaningful inclusion signals such as training support, flexible pathways, or explicit encouragement of diverse applicants. Where such language was present, Category 7 scores tended to be lower, suggesting that intentional and specific language choices may partially counteract structural exclusion. The near-total absence of inclusion-oriented language across the remaining postings represents a

significant gap: postings communicated expectations in considerable detail but offered little indication of how diverse applicants would be supported in meeting them.

Industry Variation and the Compounding of Constraints

Patterns of constraint varied by industry, with skilled trades postings demonstrating the most pronounced clustering of barriers. In these roles, mobility requirements, time expectations, and resource assumptions such as reliable personal transportation frequently co-occurred, creating compounded constraints for applicants. Healthcare postings similarly exhibited high time-related barriers, while IT postings tended to emphasize credential and experience requirements. The most significant barriers emerged not from any single requirement but from their interaction: a posting requiring evening and weekend availability, two to three years of continuous experience, and specific certifications may be accessible only to a narrow subset of applicants even if each individual requirement appears defensible in isolation. When considered collectively, these expectations reflect a model of the worker that assumes stability, access, and flexibility, conditions that are not equally distributed across populations. This clustering effect highlights the importance of intersectional analysis that attends to how requirements compound within individual postings rather than examining any single dimension of constraint in isolation.

Discussion

Rather than reiterating the descriptive patterns presented in the findings, this discussion focuses on interpreting how those patterns function collectively as structural mechanisms shaping workforce access. Throughout, a distinction is maintained between interpretations grounded directly in the coded data and broader theoretical or conceptual claims that extend beyond what this exploratory sample can confirm. The results suggest not only the presence of individual constraints but also the ways in which these constraints may interact to construct and normalize an implicit model of the “ideal worker.” This aligns with Tilly’s (1998) argument that categorical inequality is sustained through organizational routines that appear neutral while systematically advantaging some groups over others. The temporal demands identified in the Findings section illustrate this dynamic concretely: scheduling requirements that appear as neutral operational needs in fact function as implicit filters, advantaging applicants whose life circumstances align with the always-available norm while systematically constraining those whose availability is shaped by caregiving responsibilities, economic necessity, or limited access to transportation, conditions that intersect with race, class, gender, and disability in well-documented ways (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991).

These findings are consistent with and extend Gaucher et al.’s (2011) work on gendered job posting language by illustrating that bias operates along multiple intersecting dimensions simultaneously, not merely through explicit linguistic markers. Where prior research identified single-axis disparities in wording, this study reveals how overlapping constraints compound to produce layered exclusion, a phenomenon that single-axis analyses are structurally unable to capture. This supports Crenshaw’s (1991) foundational argument that experiences of disadvantage are shaped not by isolated identity categories but by their intersection, and aligns with Bowleg’s (2012) call for frameworks that attend to the complexity of simultaneous

constraint. It is worth acknowledging, however, a tension inherent in operationalizing intersectionality through a summative coding framework. The rubric organizes barriers into discrete categories that are scored and aggregated, which risks treating intersectionality as accumulation rather than constitution, that is, as the adding up of separate disadvantages rather than the qualitative transformation that occurs when constraints interact. For example, a transportation requirement paired with mandatory evening shifts in a low-wage healthcare role may not simply equal two barriers; it may produce a compounded, qualitatively distinct exclusion not captured by summing scores. Future iterations of this framework should consider incorporating relational coding procedures or case-level narrative analysis to capture how categories shape one another within individual postings.

Particularly notable is the misalignment between entry-level role classification and actual accessibility. The finding that entry-level postings frequently required one to three years of prior experience, industry-specific certification, and nonstandard availability challenges the assumption that entry-level designation signals openness to diverse applicants. This pattern is consistent with what Modestino et al. (2020) documented as opportunistic upskilling, a pattern in which employers raise education and experience requirements beyond what job performance demands when worker supply increases. For CTE learners who have completed training programs but lack continuous, linear work histories, this misalignment represents a structural gap between program completion and labor market access that existing accountability frameworks do not capture.

The near-total absence of inclusion-oriented language across postings is equally significant. While equity and inclusion have become prominent themes in policy discourse, these values were rarely reflected in the actual language of job advertisements. This gap between stated organizational commitments to diversity and the implicit signals embedded in hiring documents represents a form of structural inconsistency with real consequences for applicant self-selection. Postings that did include inclusion signals, such as acknowledgment of flexible pathways or explicit encouragement of diverse applicants, tended to have lower category-level scores in the Inclusion and Support Signals dimension, suggesting that intentional and specific language choices may partially counteract structural exclusion.

A proposition for future research concerns what might be described as performative equity signaling: the co-occurrence of surface-level diversity language and structurally exclusionary requirements within the same posting. This study did not systematically code for the presence or placement of EEO boilerplate, so no finding is claimed here. However, the pattern is theoretically significant and warrants explicit coding in future work. Research by Dobbin and Kalev (2016) documents that organizations frequently adopt formal diversity statements for purposes of institutional legitimacy while actual practices remain unchanged, and Kang et al. (2016) found that organizational diversity statements led racial-minority applicants to present their identities more openly on resumes, exposing them to the same discriminatory screening they had sought to avoid. Whether these dynamics operate through job posting language specifically, and how CTE learners navigate postings that signal welcome while embedding structural exclusion, represents a meaningful direction for future intersectional workforce research.

Industry variation in the clustering of barriers also warrants attention. Skilled trades postings exhibited the most pronounced co-occurrence of constraints, with mobility requirements, time expectations, and resource assumptions frequently appearing together. This clustering may reflect genuine industry conditions, but it also suggests that certain CTE-aligned fields reproduce structural barriers at the point of labor market entry in ways that are especially difficult for applicants navigating multiple intersecting constraints. For CTE programs preparing learners for skilled trades pathways, these findings raise important questions about whether workforce preparation models adequately account for the structural realities learners may encounter at the point of application.

Taken together, these findings argue for a reconceptualization of job postings not as neutral administrative documents but as consequential texts that actively shape workforce access. This reframing has both theoretical and practical implications for how CTE systems, workforce policy, and employer engagement are designed and evaluated.

Implications for CTE and Workforce Policy

Misalignment Between Training and Labor Market Signals

The findings highlight a potential misalignment between workforce preparation efforts and labor market expectations. CTE programs are designed to equip learners with skills, credentials, and pathways into employment; however, job postings frequently communicate expectations that extend beyond skill proficiency, including time flexibility, mobility, and continuous work histories. This disconnect raises important questions about whether current workforce preparation models fully account for the realities of employment access.

While discourse around skills-based hiring has evolved (Fuller et al., 2022; Fuller & Raman, 2017), the findings of this study indicate that credential requirements and experience expectations remain prevalent, particularly in mid-level roles. This tension suggests that hiring practices, as reflected in job postings, may still reinforce traditional access barriers even as policy rhetoric moves toward competency-based frameworks.

Job Postings as an Unexamined Layer of Accountability

This study positions job postings as an underexamined component of workforce accountability systems. Current accountability frameworks within CTE, including those associated with Perkins V, focus primarily on student outcomes such as program completion, credential attainment, and employment placement. However, these measures do not capture the accessibility or structure of the labor market opportunities into which students transition.

From an intersectional perspective, this represents a critical gap. If job postings systematically privilege applicants with specific forms of availability, stability, and prior access to resources, then equitable educational outcomes may not translate into equitable employment access. Incorporating analysis of labor market signals, such as job postings, into tools like the

Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) could provide a more holistic understanding of workforce alignment and equity.

Reframing Equity Beyond Participation

The findings suggest the need to expand definitions of equity within workforce systems. Much of the existing literature and policy discourse focuses on increasing participation among special populations, including individuals in nontraditional fields, single parents, and economically disadvantaged learners. While these efforts are critical, they may be insufficient if structural barriers persist within hiring practices.

An intersectional framework, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and expanded by Bowleg (2012), emphasizes that inequality is not experienced along a single dimension but through overlapping systems of constraint. The findings of this study demonstrate how job postings may reinforce these constraints by embedding assumptions aligned with a narrow model of the “ideal worker.” As such, equity efforts must move beyond access to education and toward addressing how opportunity is structured and communicated within the labor market itself.

Implications for Program Design and Employer Engagement

These findings have practical implications for CTE program design and employer partnerships. Educators and workforce practitioners may benefit from incorporating job posting analysis into curriculum development, career advising, and employer engagement strategies. Specifically, analyzing job postings in targeted industries can help identify misalignments between program outcomes and employer expectations, hidden barriers that may affect student transitions into employment, and opportunities to advocate for more inclusive hiring practices in partnership with regional employers.

Organizations such as Advance CTE (2021) emphasize the importance of aligning education with workforce needs while promoting equity and access. This study suggests that such alignment must include not only skills and credentials, but also a critical examination of how job opportunities are structured and communicated. Employer engagement efforts that include conversation about job posting language and inclusive hiring design represent an underutilized lever for advancing workforce equity.

Toward More Inclusive Workforce Signaling

Taken together, the findings support the need to reconceptualize job postings as more than administrative tools. They are, instead, powerful signals that shape who perceives themselves as qualified and able to participate in the labor market. Addressing inequities in workforce access therefore requires not only preparing individuals for work, but also critically examining and reshaping the signals that define opportunity. The evidence highlighted here suggests several directions for practice and policy that warrant piloting and evaluation. First, Perkins V accountability frameworks could be expanded to include labor market signal analysis, systematically examining the accessibility of job postings in sectors CTE programs prepare

learners to enter. Second, CTE programs themselves could develop “posting literacy” curricula that teach learners to critically read and navigate job advertisement language as part of career readiness preparation. Third, state CTE agencies could develop voluntary standards or toolkits for employers in CTE-aligned industries, establishing benchmarks for inclusive posting design. Finally, workforce funding bodies might explore whether employer accessibility, as reflected in job posting practices, could be considered alongside traditional placement metrics in evaluating program success. Each of these represents an actionable direction for reducing structural barriers at the labor market entry point and warrants empirical evaluation in future work.

Conclusion

This study examined job postings as gatekeeping mechanisms within workforce systems, applying an intersectional lens to an exploratory purposive sample of 20 job postings across CTE-aligned industries. Findings reveal that job postings frequently embed assumptions aligned with an “ideal worker” model characterized by availability, stability, and prior access to resources, assumptions that operate as implicit filters shaping who perceives themselves as qualified to apply.

The findings highlight a critical disconnect between workforce preparation systems and labor market access. While CTE programs emphasize equitable participation and skill development, job postings often reinforce structural barriers that may limit access for individuals navigating intersecting constraints. The near-absence of inclusion-oriented language across postings, combined with the misalignment between entry-level classification and actual accessibility, suggests that equity efforts focused solely on educational access are insufficient if the labor market entry point remains structured around a narrow and exclusionary model of the ideal applicant.

Addressing inequities in workforce access therefore requires extending equity efforts beyond education and into the structure and communication of employment opportunities themselves. Future research should expand this analysis using larger, more diverse datasets, examine the relationship between job posting language and actual hiring outcomes, and explore strategies for supporting more inclusive job posting design in partnership with CTE-aligned employers. Longitudinal and multimethod approaches that pair job posting analysis with applicant experience data would further illuminate how these structural signals shape workforce access across populations. Ultimately, preparing learners for equitable workforce participation requires not only transforming educational systems, but also critically examining the organizational texts that define who is invited to participate in work itself.

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