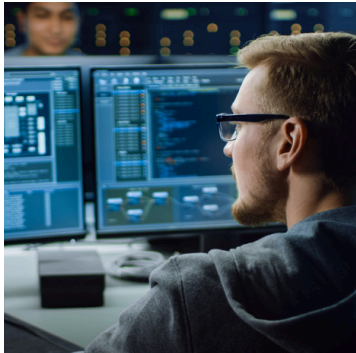




TALENTFIRST

Vision. Insights. Solutions.

WEST MICHIGAN WORKFORCE TRENDS & INSIGHTS REPORT 2026

STRATEGIC PLAN

TalentFirst's mission, vision, and three strategic goals

MISSION

TalentFirst is a partnership of West Michigan business leaders working with educators, workforce leaders, and policymakers to make West Michigan a talent leader.

VISION

Be the premiere partner for West Michigan business leaders, delivering innovative and effective talent solutions to make the region a national leader in talent creation.

1 Ensure Every Child Reads



Use of evidence-based literacy practices across Pre-K to Grade 3



Policy and funding decisions aligned to proven literacy strategies



Reduction in chronic absenteeism among early elementary students

2 Prepare Every Student for Career Success



Increased high school completion and attainment of postsecondary credits and credentials



Employer-defined career readiness standards adopted systemwide



Stronger alignment among high schools, CTE, and postsecondary pathways to employer demand

3 Ensure Adults Have the Knowledge and Skills Employers Need



Growth in employer-led training enrollment



Increased completion of adult high school equivalency with employer-valued credentials



Improved adult enrollment, persistence, and completion in postsecondary education and training



A MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP

A letter from the president

West Michigan Leader,

TalentFirst members understand that workforce challenges today are more complex — and more interconnected — than at any point in recent history. This report represents the culmination of a year-long effort to understand those dynamics in real time and, more importantly, to identify where employers can lead.

Beginning in early 2025, TalentFirst convened nine Industry Deep Dives, engaging more than 100 CEOs and senior HR leaders across West Michigan. These conversations paired executive insight with rigorous labor market data to surface not just where constraints exist — but where opportunity is emerging.

Three clear patterns cut across every industry:

Succession pressure is rising. In many sectors, 20–30% of supervisors, managers, and technical leaders are approaching retirement, making leadership development and knowledge transfer a near-term priority.

Credential pathways have not kept pace with employer demand. Postsecondary enrollment has declined since 2011, reducing available capacity in high-growth areas such as STEM, skilled trades, healthcare, and business operations.

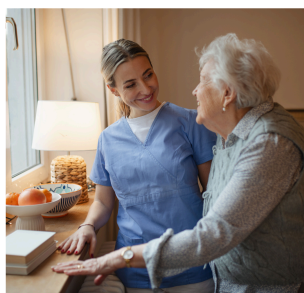
Early-career instability is increasing. Entry-level roles experience turnover two to five times higher than mid-skill positions, reflecting shifting worker expectations.

At the same time, employers are seeing a powerful counter-trend: durable skills — communication, problem-solving, leadership — are becoming the shared foundation of workforce resilience, even as AI and automation reshape how work gets done.

This report is designed to help employers interpret these trends, benchmark their position in the market, and align around strategies that strengthen West Michigan's talent system.

Kevin Stotts

President, TalentFirst







TALENTFIRST

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WEST MICHIGAN TALENT TRENDS & INSIGHTS

Executive summary

A region at a crossroads

West Michigan remains one of Michigan's most stable and competitive labor markets, but continued growth is colliding with a tightening supply of talent. Retirements are outpacing new entrants, credential pipelines are not keeping pace with demand, and rapidly changing skill requirements are increasing pressure across the regional economy.

Today, the region supports **834,214 workers**, with job growth projected at **+3.9% (+29,366 jobs) by 2035**. However, that growth is occurring alongside rising turnover (74% regionwide), longer time-to-fill (25 days on average), and growing competition from national employers — particularly through remote work.

The challenge is not a lack of jobs — it is the pace of adaptation across employers, education, and workforce systems.

Key insights

GROWTH IS CONCENTRATED WHERE SKILLS TRAVEL

Demand continues to rise for roles that combine technical competence with leadership, judgment, and adaptability — particularly in Professional Services, Healthcare, Energy & Construction, and IT. These roles increasingly draw from the same talent pool, heightening cross-industry competition.

CREDENTIAL SUPPLY AND DEMAND ARE EVOLVING AT DIFFERENT RATES

West Michigan produces
4 graduates for every
10 job openings

In high-demand roles,
there is only **1 graduate** for every **3 openings**

Gaps between credential pathways and employer demand **constrain access to talent for advanced roles**

REMOTE WORK IS RAISING THE STAKES

Remote roles account for a relatively small share of postings (2.3% locally vs. 4.9% statewide), but they carry an average wage premium of 2.1× (\$43,800). This creates borderless competition for experienced talent while reinforcing the importance of strong local development pathways.

DURABLE SKILLS ANCHOR WORKFORCE RESILIENCE

Across every industry, communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills appear in postings at more than 2× the growth rate of task-specific skills. As AI adoption accelerates, these capabilities increasingly differentiate stable, promotable talent.

Remote roles pay more on average

REGION OVERVIEW

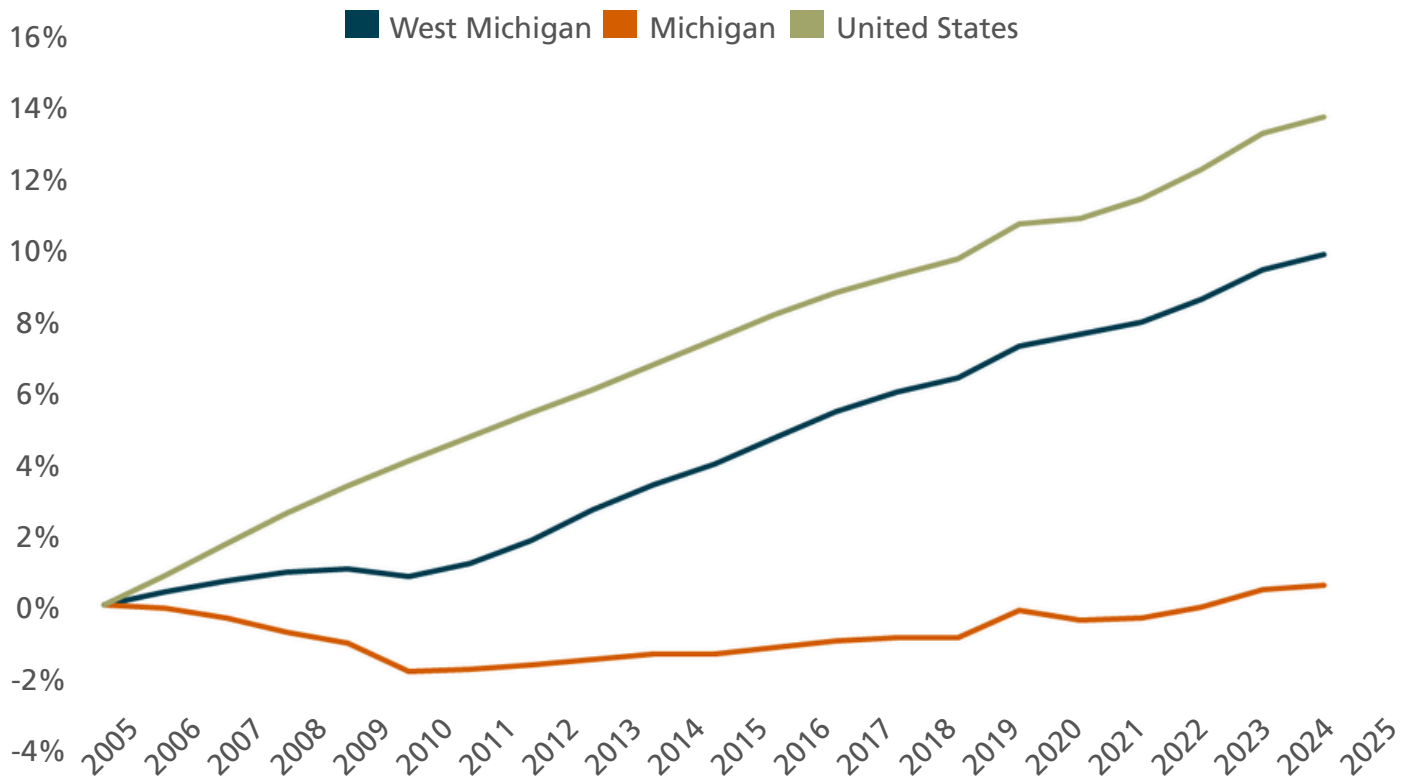
Population growth

A competitive advantage with limits

West Michigan's population has grown steadily since 2005, increasing by 11.1% through 2025 — nearly keeping pace with the national growth rate of 15.5%. By comparison, Michigan's overall population has remained largely flat, with growth of just 0.6% over the same period. This contrast underscores West Michigan's economic resilience and its role as a key driver of the state's modest population gains. However, population growth alone will not solve talent needs. Workforce availability depends on participation, skill alignment, and advancement pathways.

2025 Population
1,672,008

Percent Change in Population Indexed to 2005



2025
West Michigan
+11.1%

2025
Michigan
+0.6%

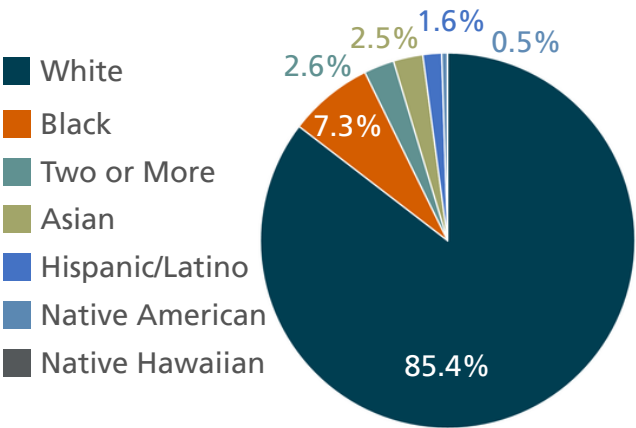
2025
United States
+15.5%

REGION OVERVIEW

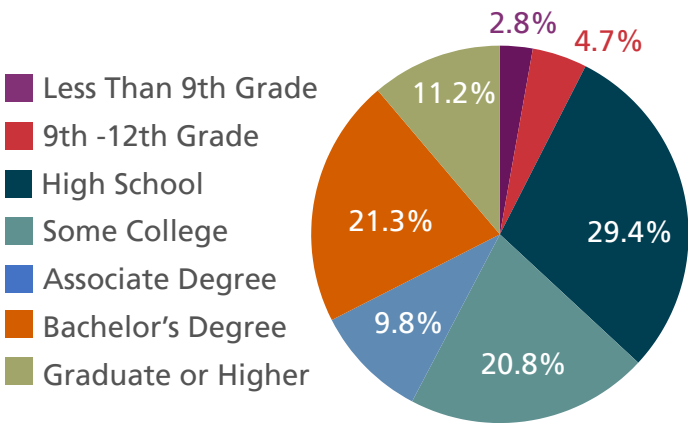
Population demographics

Breakdown by race/ethnicity and education

Population by Race/Ethnicity,
West Michigan
2025



Population by Education,
West Michigan
2025

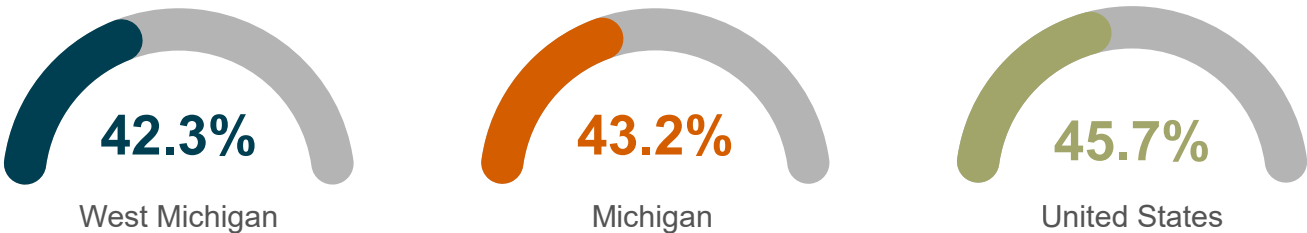


U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2024), Lightcast (2025)

West Michigan’s demographic profile is predominantly **White (85.4%)**, with an educational foundation where **nearly 30% of the population have completed high school as their highest credential**. While **21.3%** of residents hold a bachelor's degree, the region's overall rate of education beyond high school stands at **42.3%**, trailing both **state (43.2%)** and **national (45.7%)** averages. This attainment gap reflects a growing disconnect between current educational attainment patterns and the rising skill requirements of a modern economy, particularly as postsecondary completions have declined since 2011.

Addressing these disparities is essential to ensuring a diverse and skilled workforce can sustain West Michigan's long-term economic momentum.

Percent of Adults with Education Beyond High School
2025



U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2024); Lightcast (2025)

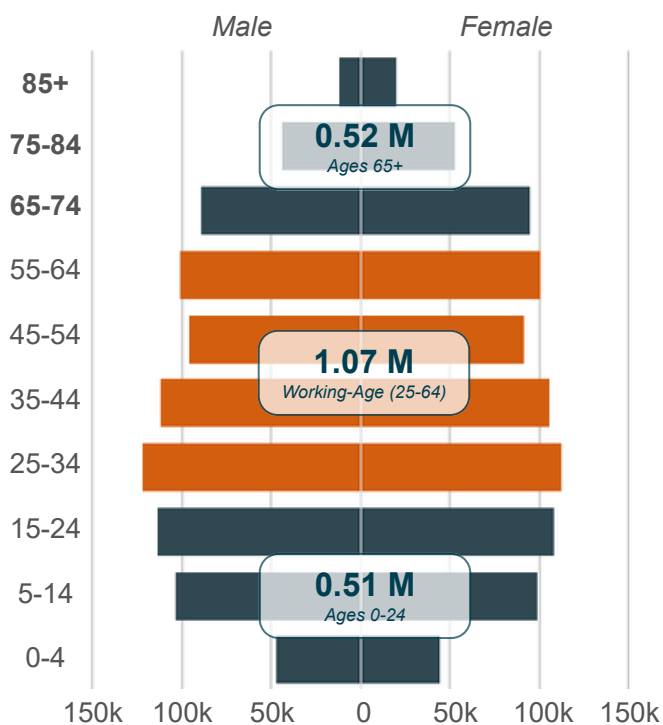
REGION OVERVIEW

Forecasted growth

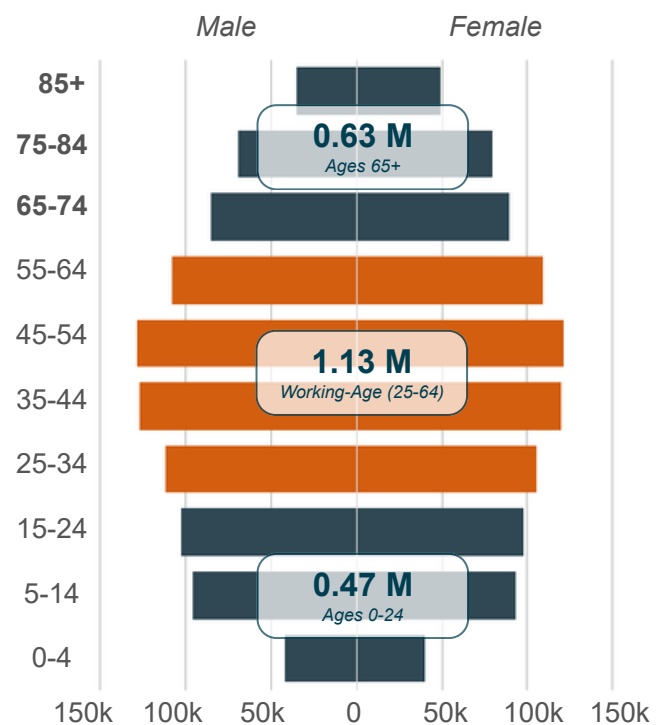
Expected to continue through 2045

West Michigan is set to see a significant age shift between 2025 and 2045, with the **largest growth in the 75-84 and 85+ age groups** for both men and women. While the elderly population rises, the working-age population is projected to grow only slightly, from 1.07 million to 1.13 million over 20 years. This limited workforce growth raises concerns about the region's ability to meet future labor demands, particularly in industries reliant on aging workers, like IT, Energy & Construction, and Manufacturing.

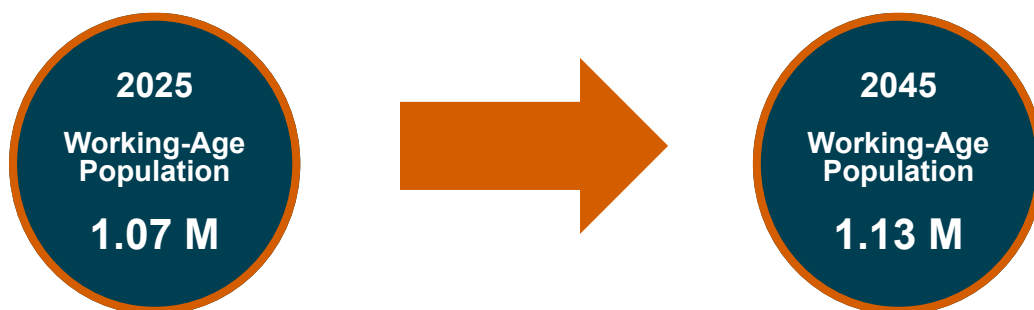
Population by Age, West Michigan
2025



Population by Age, West Michigan
2045



U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey and Decennial Census

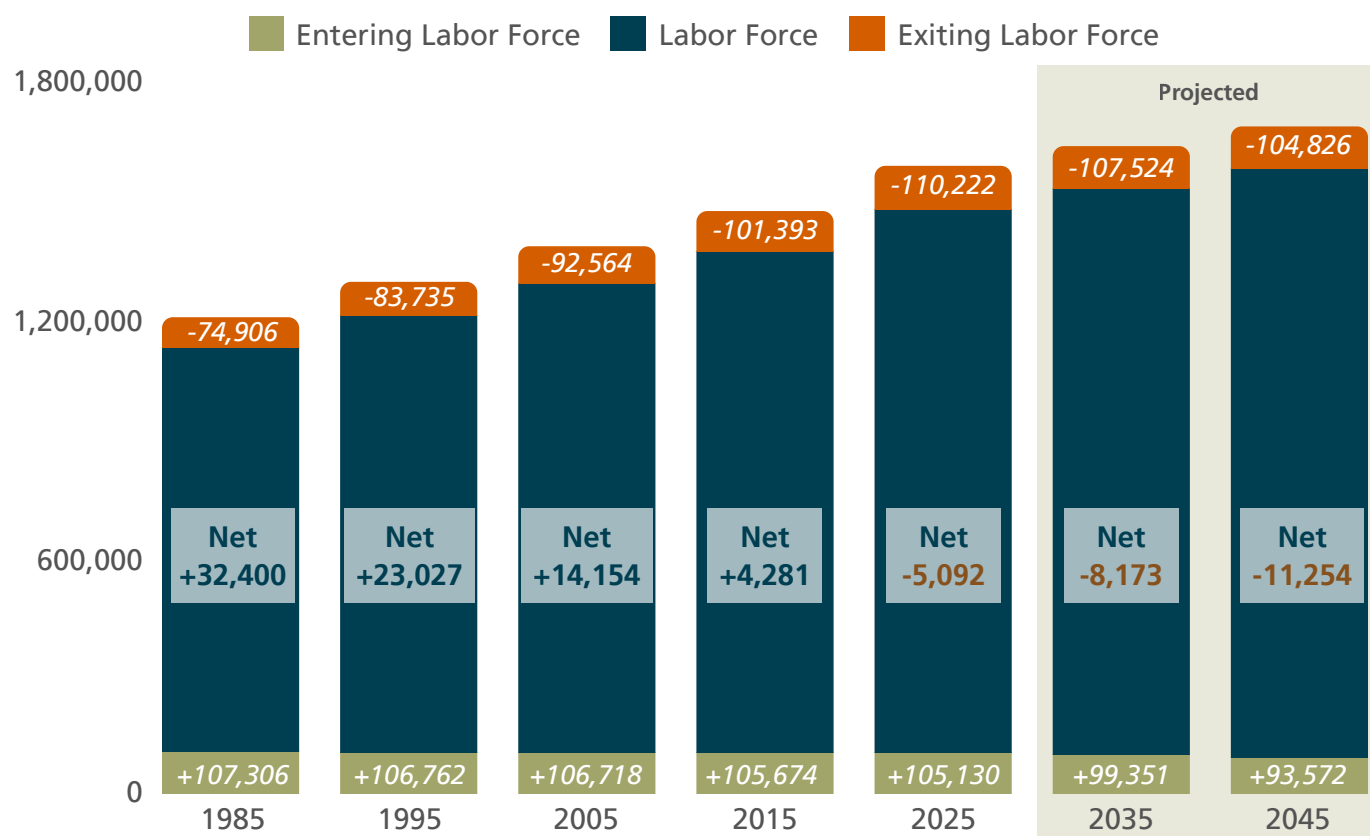


REGION OVERVIEW

Labor force outlook

Entrants trail retirements

Entering vs. Exiting the Labor Force, West Michigan 1985 to 2045



U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates;
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Job Opening and Labor Turnover Survey (1985-2025)

For decades, the region consistently saw more workers entering the labor force than exiting. That balance is shifting: **by 2025, retirements will surpass new labor force entrants**, with the gap projected to widen through 2045. While the total labor force continues to grow modestly, the number of younger workers is not keeping pace, signaling long-term challenges for talent availability, business growth, and regional competitiveness.

1.4

Entrants per
exit in 1985

0.9

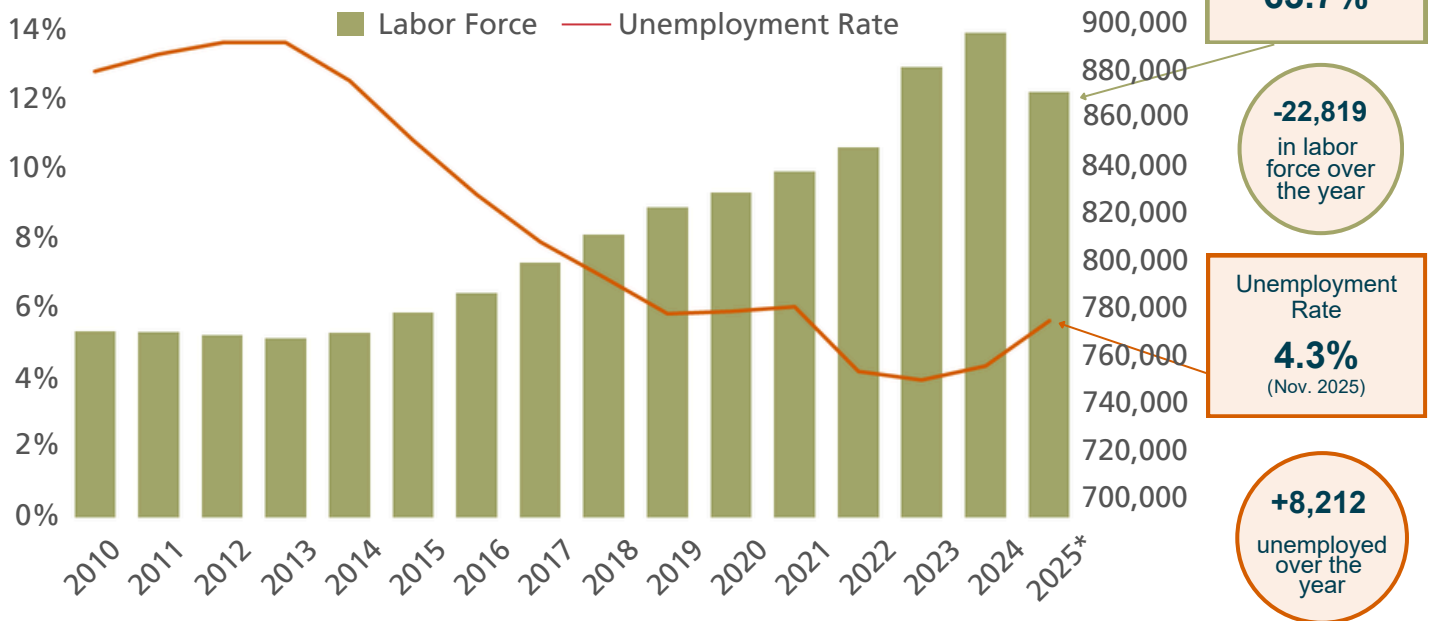
Entrants per exit
expected in 2045

REGION OVERVIEW

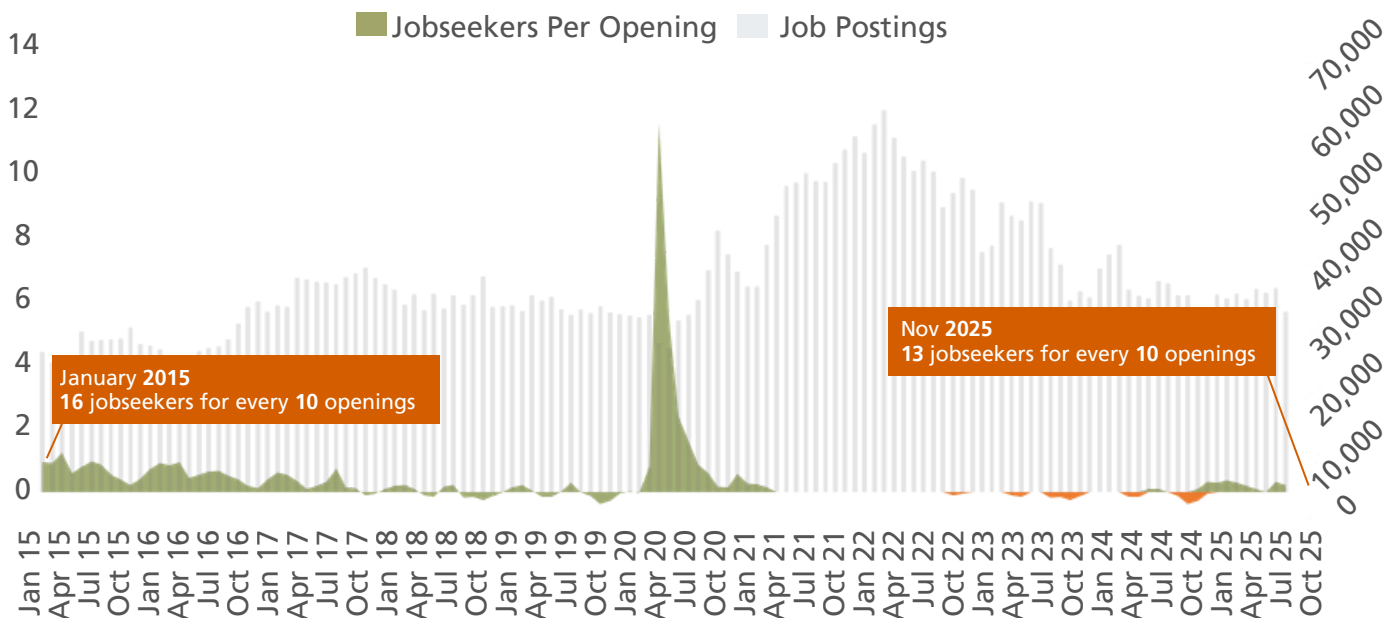
Labor market shift

A tighter, more navigable market

Labor Force and Unemployment Rate, West Michigan
2010-2025



Jobseekers per Job Opening, West Michigan
Jan. 2015 - Nov. 2025



U.S. Census Bureau, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (2010-2025); Lightcast

REGION OVERVIEW

Labor force dynamics

High engagement, targeted opportunity

Civilian Labor Force and Unemployment by Demographics, West Michigan 2024

Demographic Group	Labor Force	Total Employment	Total Unemployment	Labor Force Participation Rate	Unemployment Rate
16+	841,292	805,168	36,124	63.9%	4.3%
Age Bracket					
16-19	44,574	39,234	5,339	49.1%	12.0%
20-24	88,341	81,910	6,383	79.9%	7.2%
25-54	525,520	505,533	19,313	84.2%	3.7%
55-64	137,701	133,787	3,897	65.4%	2.8%
65+	45,906	44,634	1,297	16.4%	2.8%
Race					
White	682,115	656,458	25,677	63.3%	3.8%
Black	47,074	42,564	4,517	61.6%	9.6%
Native American	3,817	3,607	203	60.4%	5.3%
Asian	19,747	19,041	716	71.4%	3.6%
Some Other Races	23,086	22,019	1,063	68.2%	4.6%
Two or More Races	32,542	22,451	2,854	69.9%	8.8%
Ethnicity					
Hispanic/Latino	75,511	71,245	4,208	72.3%	5.6%

U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey;
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (2024)

West Michigan's civilian labor force totaled **841,292 individuals in 2024**, with an overall participation rate of **63.9%**, reflecting strong engagement across the working-age population. At a regional level, this confirms that West Michigan continues to benefit from a workforce closely connected to employment and economic activity.

Prime-age workers (**25–54**) remain the backbone of the labor market, with participation above **84%**, supplying the core capacity that supports regional industries. Younger adults ages **20–24** also show high attachment (**79.9%**), signaling healthy early-career entry as individuals transition from education into the workforce.

Participation begins to decline as workers approach later career stages. Among individuals ages **55–64**, participation drops to **65.4%**, reflecting the early effects of retirement transitions that are expected to accelerate over the next decade. As experienced workers exit, fewer younger entrants are available to fully offset this shift, elevating the importance of retention, phased retirement, and knowledge-transfer strategies.

While overall unemployment remains relatively low (4.3%), outcomes vary meaningfully by education and demographic group. Strong participation among Hispanic/Latino (72.3%) and Asian (71.4%) residents underscores their essential role in sustaining workforce capacity, while higher unemployment among Black or African American residents (9.6%) highlights persistent access gaps. Together, these trends indicate that sustaining labor supply will depend less on participation alone and more on **who remains connected to stable employment and for how long**.

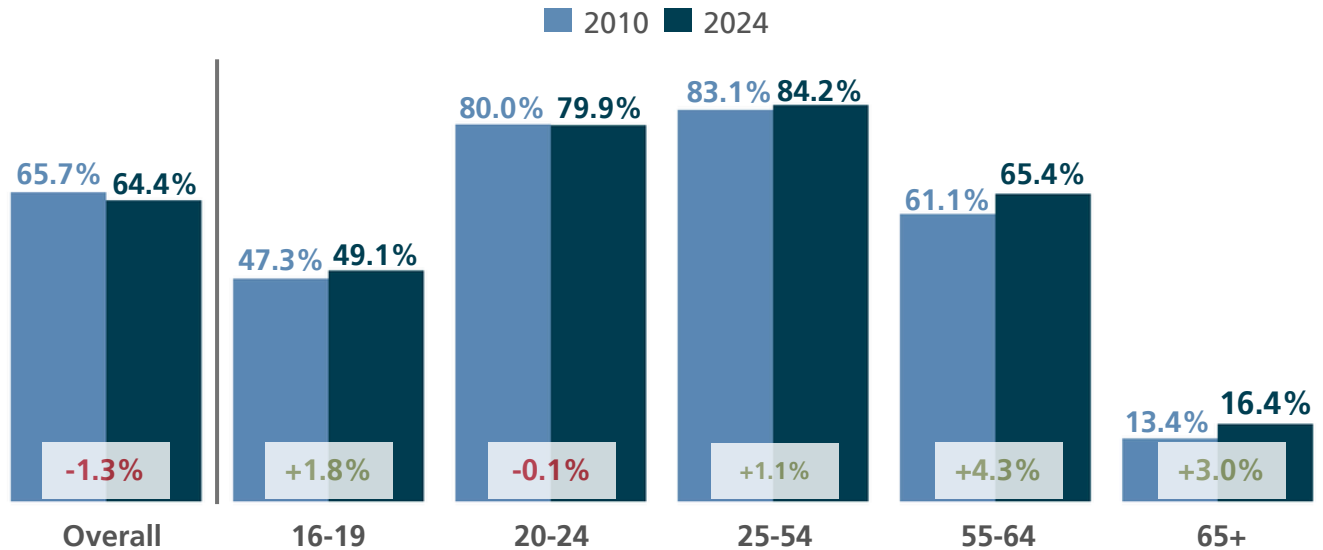


WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Labor force dynamics

By age & education

Labor Force Participation Rate by Age Group, West Michigan



Since 2010, West Michigan's labor force participation profile has shifted in meaningful ways, reflecting both demographic change and evolving workforce behavior. Overall participation declined modestly over the period, settling at **64.4% in 2024**, consistent with long-term aging trends across the region and the nation.

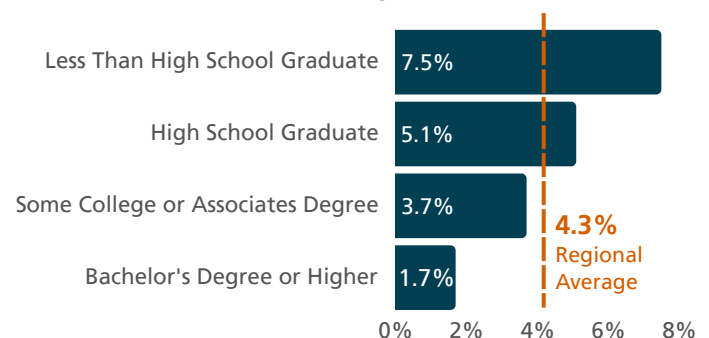
Prime-age workers (**25–54**) have remained the most stable and engaged segment of the workforce, with participation holding steady above **84%** across the past decade. Participation among younger adults ages **20–24** remained relatively flat over this period, indicating consistent — but not expanding — attachment to the labor market during early career stages. Participation among teenagers (16–19) increased modestly, suggesting some improvement in early workforce exposure.

The most notable shift occurred among older workers. Participation for individuals ages **55–64** increased from **61.1% to 65.4%**, while participation among those **65 and older** rose from **13.4% to 16.4%**, reflecting delayed retirements and growing reliance on experienced talent. These trends suggest that older workers are remaining in the workforce longer, even as overall labor force growth slows.

Within this shifting participation landscape, education has become the strongest predictor of employment stability. In 2024, workers without a high school diploma faced an unemployment rate of 7.5%, compared to 5.1% for high school graduates and 3.7% for those with some college or an associate degree.

Unemployment fell to just 1.7% among individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher, reinforcing that **credential attainment is now the clearest safeguard against job loss as the labor market tightens**.

Unemployment Rate by Education (25-64), West Michigan 2024



REGION OVERVIEW

Migration patterns

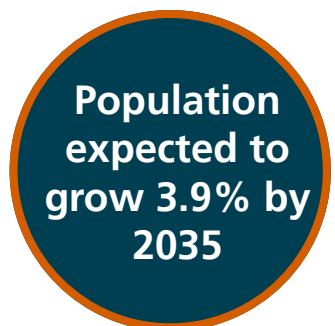
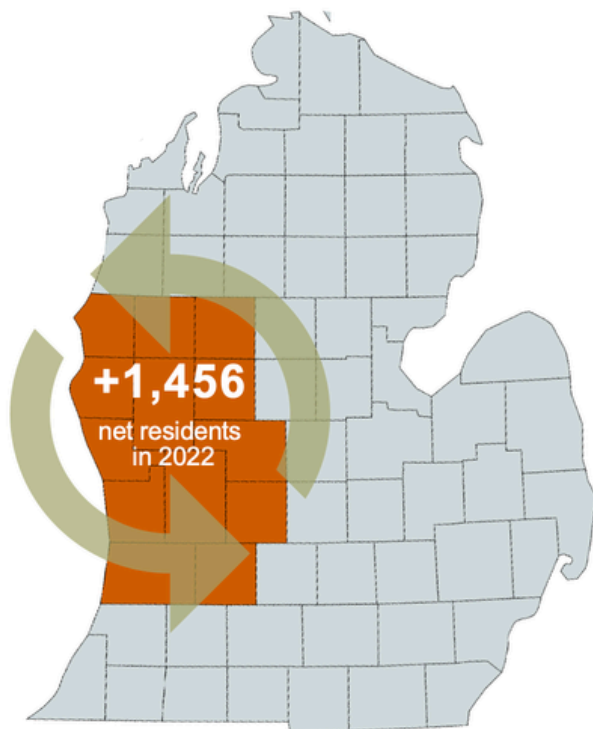
Not a strong source of talent

In 2022, West Michigan saw a **net gain of 1,456 residents**, with **32,168 people moving in** and **30,710 moving out**. While most counties experienced positive net migration, **Kent County faced a notable loss of 3,217 residents**, likely due to population shifts to neighboring areas.

Despite this, the overall population of West Michigan is **expected to grow by 3.9% (29,366 residents)** by 2035, reflecting modest but positive growth.

Inflow/Outflow for Individual Counties
2022

County	Inflow	Out Flow	Net
Allegan	5,829	5,452	+377
Barry	3,237	2,636	+601
Ionia	2,746	2,700	+46
Kent	20,666	23,883	-3,217
Lake	861	656	+205
Mason	1,259	1,095	+164
Mecosta	2,309	1,960	+349
Montcalm	3,247	2,918	+329
Muskegon	5,271	4,659	+612
Newaygo	2,348	2,014	+334
Oceana	1,206	1,089	+117
Osceola	1,271	1,154	+117
Ottawa	12,752	11,330	+1,422
Net	63,002	61,546	+1,456



+32,168

Moved to West Michigan in 2022



-30,710

Moved out of West Michigan in 2022



U.S. Census Bureau, County to County Migration Flows (2022); IRS, Migration Data (2022)

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Migration patterns

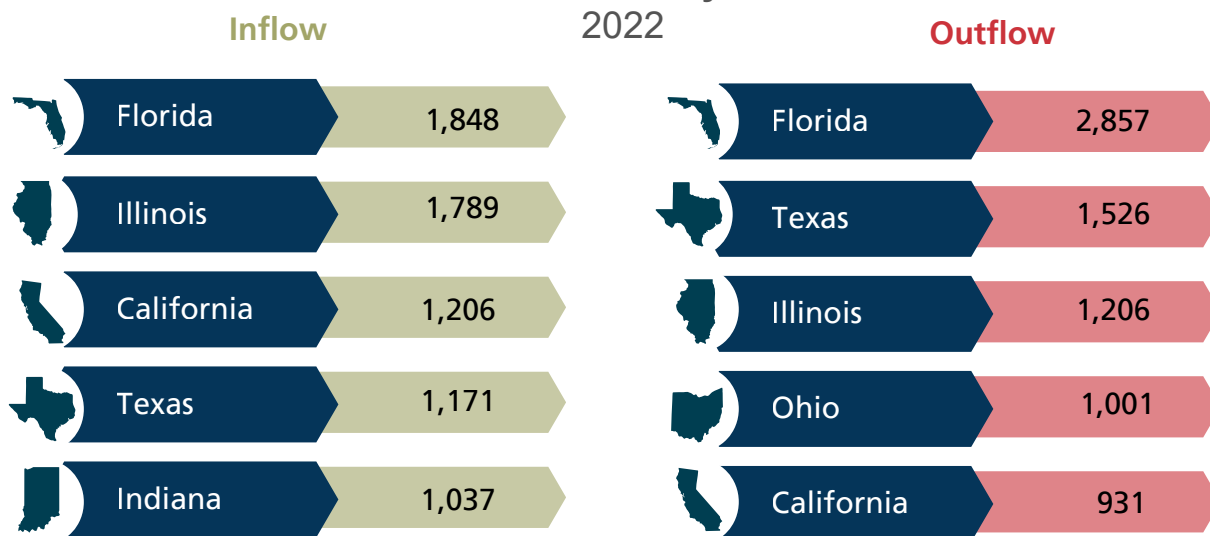
By age & location

However, migration trends show concerning gaps at both ends of the age spectrum. West Michigan is **losing residents under 17 and over 65**, suggesting long-term challenges for the labor pipeline — fewer youth entering the system and a shrinking senior population that may alter future care demand.

Inflow/Outflow by Age Group 2022

Age group	Inflow	Share (%)	Outflow	Share (%)	Net
0-17 years	13,382	21.3%	13,487	21.9%	-105
18-24 years	25,324	40.1%	25,548	39.9%	+776
25-34 years	15,321	24.3%	14,349	23.8%	+672
35-54 years	6,887	11.0%	6,721	10.9%	+166
55-64 years	1,692	2.7%	1,605	2.6%	+87
65+ years	396	0.7%	536	0.8%	-140

Inflow/Outflow by State 2022



U.S. Census Bureau, County to County Migration Flows (2022); IRS, Migration Data (2022)

West Michigan's migration patterns reveal a dynamic talent exchange with the nation's largest economic hubs, most notably **Florida, Illinois, and Texas**. While the region successfully attracts significant volume from Illinois and California, it faces a notable net outflow to Florida and Texas, suggesting a competitive tension with these high-growth markets. **Florida remains the most active partner in both directions**, though a net loss of over 1,000 residents indicates a specific challenge in balancing regional retention.

Conversely, the positive talent balance with Illinois and California positions West Michigan as a compelling alternative for workers migrating from high-cost states. This continuous churn underscores the importance of refining the regional value proposition to stabilize the workforce and maximize long-term growth.

MIGRATION TRENDS AFFECTING WEST MICHIGAN

Dynamic talent exchange with large talent hubs

Fewer young people and seniors

Rising talent influx from high-cost metros



WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS BY INDUSTRY

REGION OVERVIEW

West Michigan

Strong growth, rising talent pressure

Employment



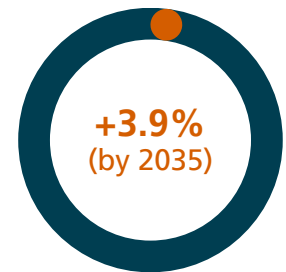
17.0%
of Michigan's workforce

Median Earnings



-\$1,565
below Michigan's
average

Projected Growth



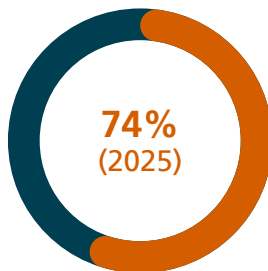
+29,366
jobs by 2035

Average Time-to-Fill



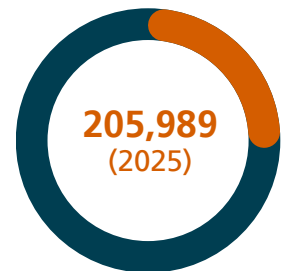
1 Day
higher than Michigan's
average

Turnover Rate



6%
higher than Michigan's
average

Jobseekers per Month



29.2%
of total in Michigan

THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO

Address talent shortages

Build, upskill, and retain scarce technical and professional talent.

Integrate human + AI

Equip workers to harness automation and AI-driven tools.

Retain key expertise

Prevent knowledge loss and stabilize high-impact roles.

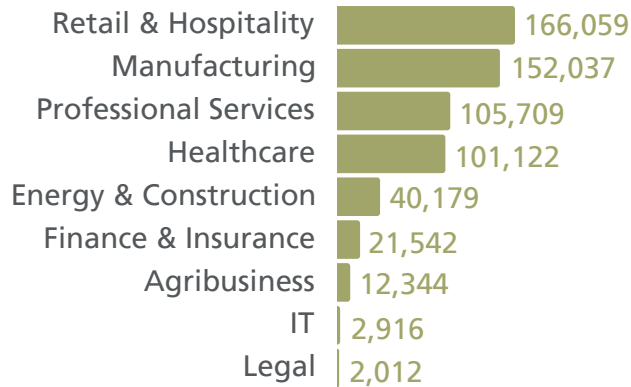


WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

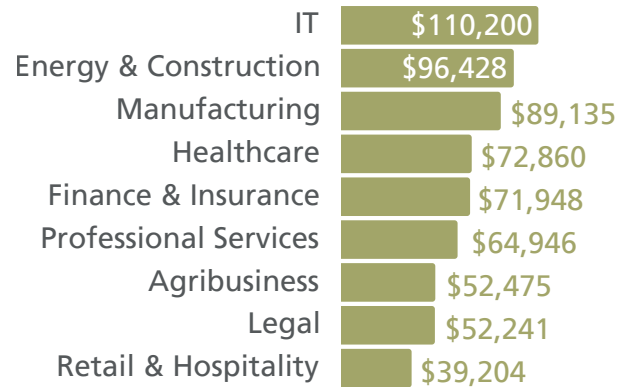
Industries

At a glance

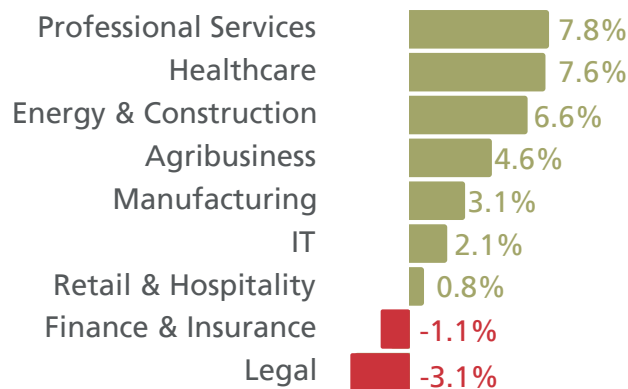
Employment by Industry
2025



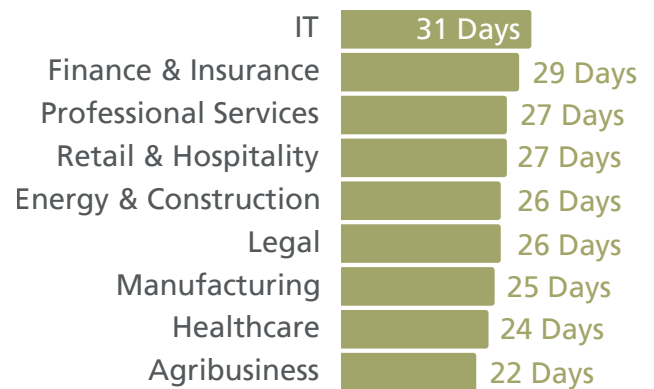
Median Earnings by Industry
2025



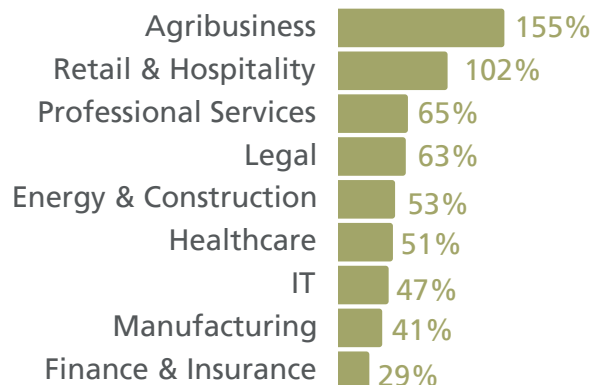
Employment Projections by Industry
2025-2035



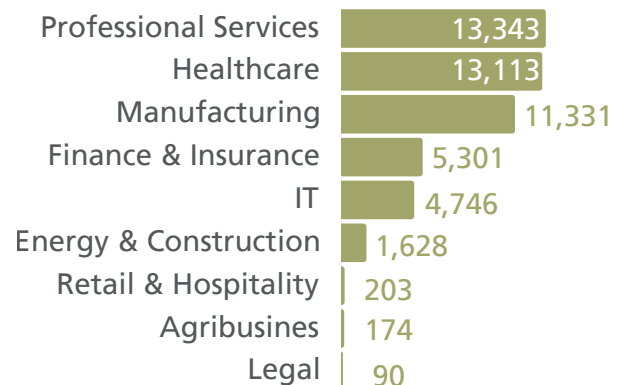
Average Time-To-Fill by Industry
2025



Turnover by Industry
2025



Average Jobseekers Per Month by Industry
2025



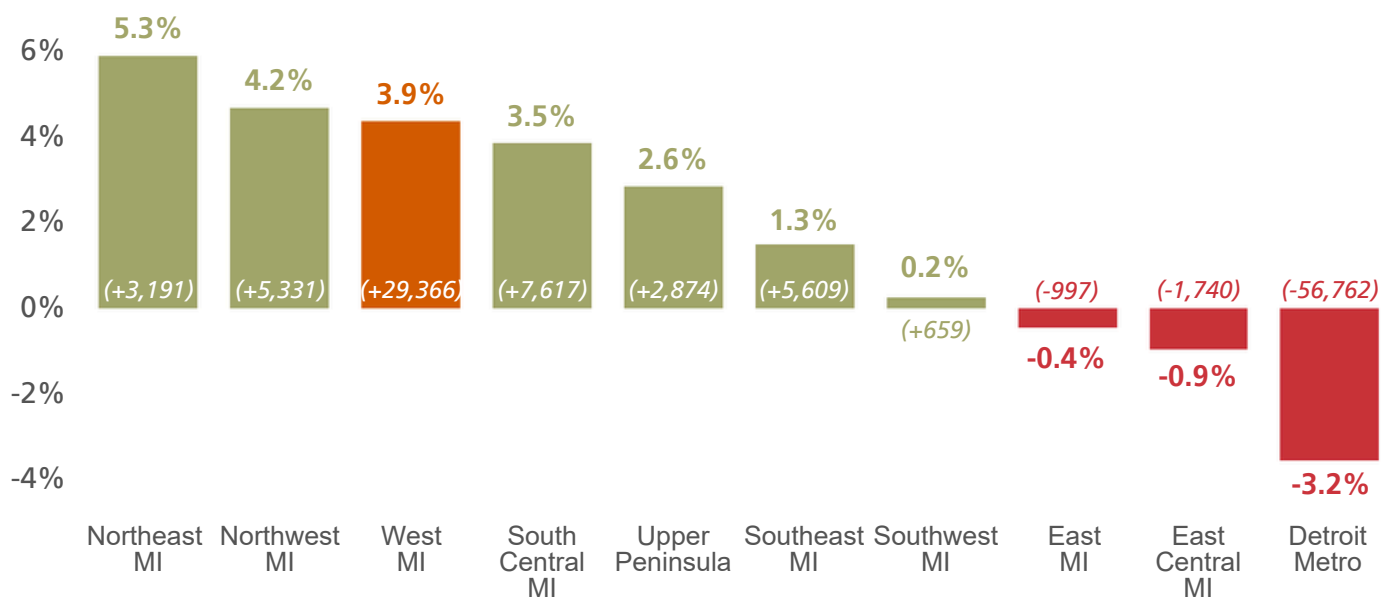
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Projected growth

Expected to continue in West Michigan

West Michigan serves as a primary engine for Michigan's economy, representing a significant **17.8%** of the total statewide workforce. Between 2025 and 2035, the region is forecasted to add 29,366 net jobs, while Detroit Metro — the state's largest employment hub — is expected to **contract by 56,762 jobs**. This stark divergence between Michigan's two most prominent markets highlights West Michigan's unique resilience and its status as a critical center for regional stability. Meanwhile, smaller regions like the **Upper Peninsula are seeing notable gains (+2,874 jobs or 2.6%)**, signaling that growth potential is broadening into markets that are rapidly modernizing their industrial and operational capacity. Ultimately, these trends reveal a polarized landscape, requiring West Michigan to execute a sophisticated talent strategy to stay ahead of both declining metro centers and accelerating smaller markets.

Projected Change in Employment by Prosperity Region 2025 - 2035



West Michigan Industries Ranked by Projected Growth 2025-2035

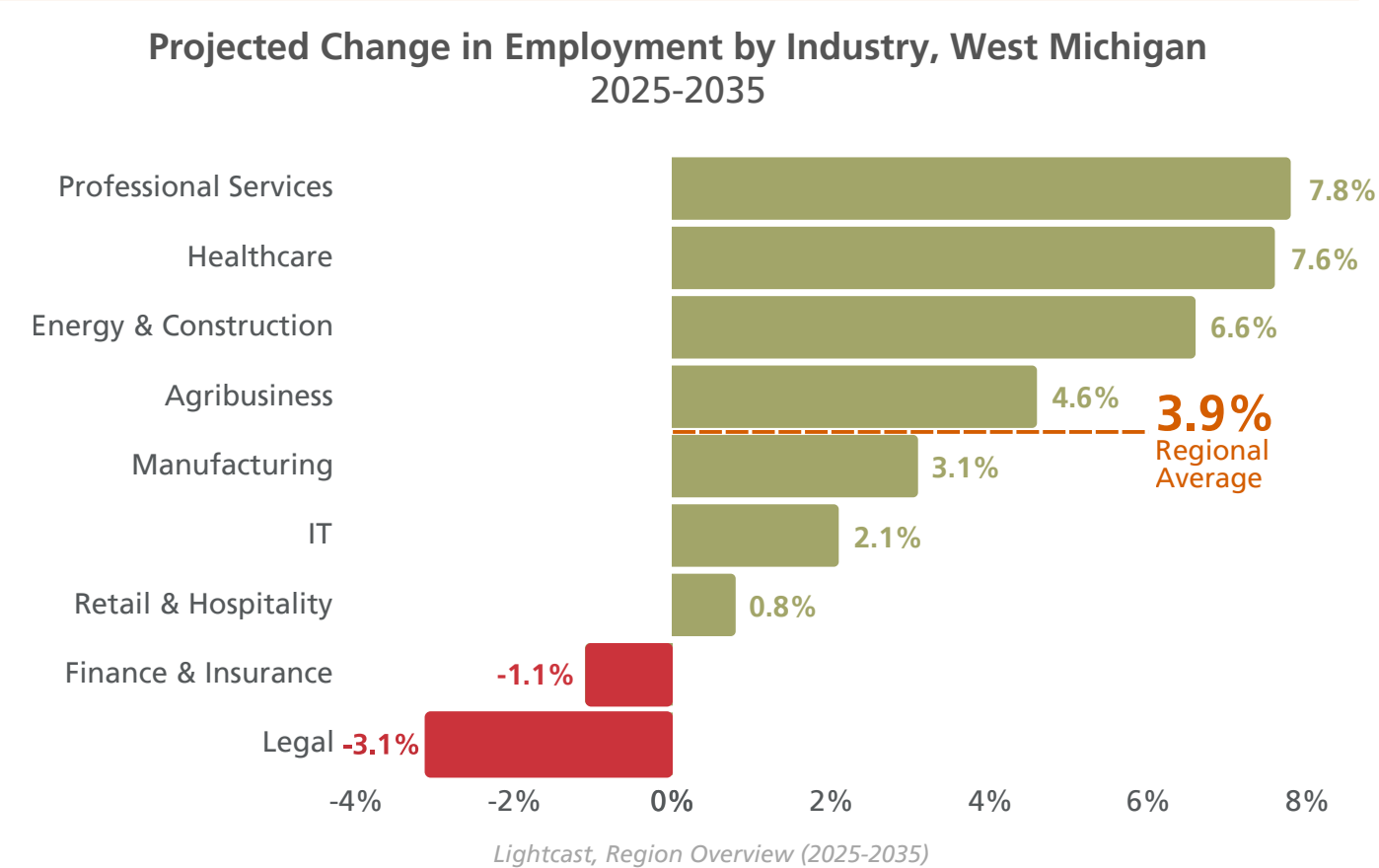


Lightcast, Region Overview (2025-2035)

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Projected growth

By industry



West Michigan’s shifting industry landscape is increasingly defined by a divergence between service-oriented expansion and technology-driven consolidation. High growth in **Professional Services (+7.8%)** and **Healthcare (+7.6%)** is primarily fueled by an aging demographic and the complex infrastructure required to support the region’s expanding business management sector.

This expansion creates a "multiplier effect," driving the 6.6% growth in Energy and Construction as new professional and medical facilities are built to meet demand. Conversely, the negative projections for **Legal (-3.1%)** and **Finance (-1.1%)** reflect a period of intense industry consolidation and the rapid adoption of advanced AI and automation tools. These sectors are seeing a significant reduction in support and assistant roles as automation allows fewer practitioners to manage higher volumes, effectively shifting labor demand away from administrative tasks toward high-level strategic oversight.

Overall, while technical and physical infrastructure remains in high demand, traditional "paper-heavy" industries are contracting as they trade human-capital volume for technological efficiency.

EMPLOYMENT CHANGES

Automation replacing routine and support tasks

An aging population increasing demand for care and services

Industry consolidation reducing administrative roles

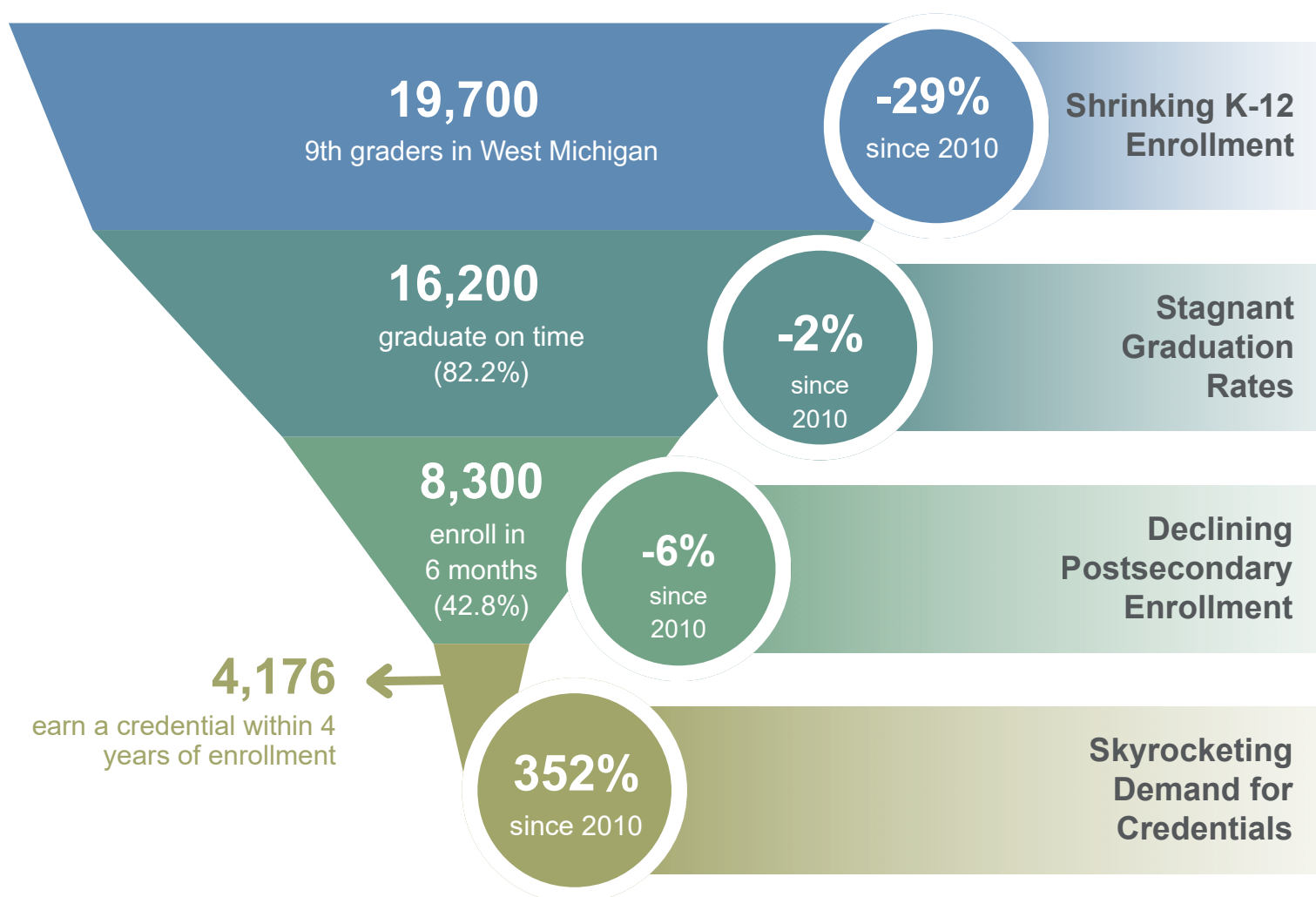
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

K-20 pipeline

Leakages limit skilled talent supply

There are several key transition points across West Michigan's K–20 pipeline where participation declines contribute to a growing shortage of skilled workers. Of the **19,700 ninth graders** who enter a West Michigan high school each year, about **16,200 (82.2%)** graduate on time, and only **8,300 (42.8%)** enroll in a postsecondary institution within six months of graduation. Within four years of enrollment, roughly **4,176 students** — or **21.2%** of the original ninth-grade cohort — earn a credential. This results in a critical gap: **for every seven job openings, only four qualified graduates enter the workforce each year, even as employer demand for these skills continues to rise.**

West Michigan's K-20 Pipeline



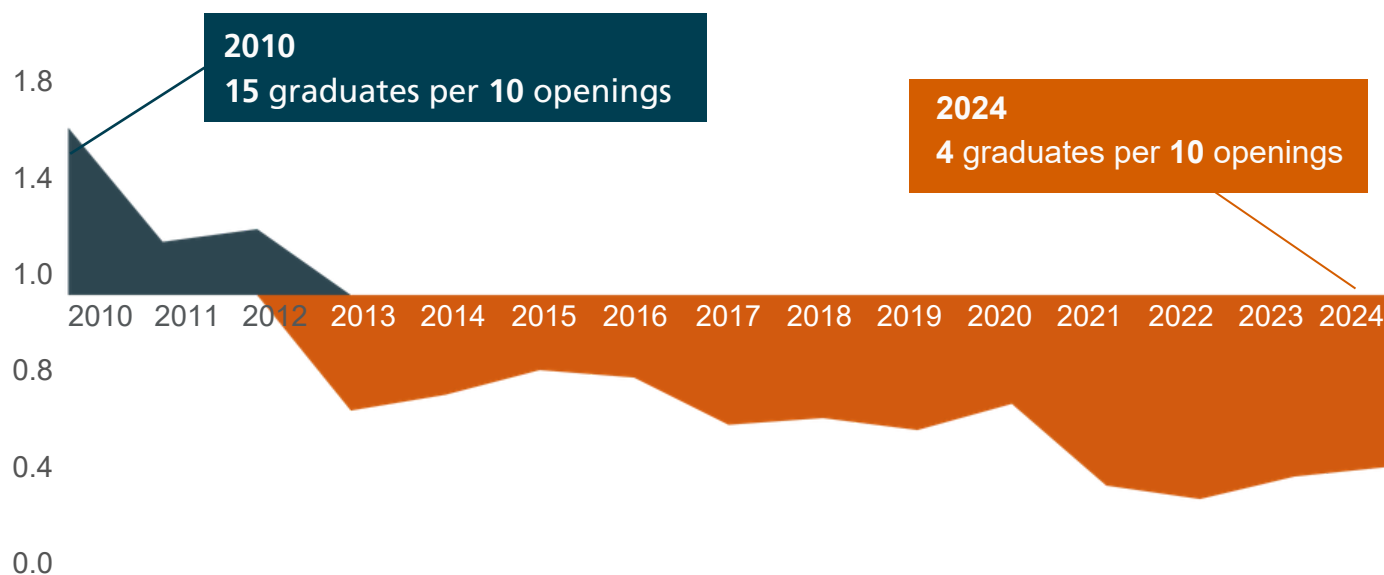
MiSchoolData, K-12 Grad/Drop Data (2024); National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS (2024)

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Postsecondary pipeline

Shifting supply amid rising demand

Ratio of Graduates per Job Opening, West Michigan
2010-2024



National Center For Educational Statistics, IPEDS (2010-2024)

2010

West Michigan produced a total of **22,957** postsecondary graduates.

15,072 job openings requiring credentials.

152%

of demand met for West Michigan.

2024

40%

of demand met for West Michigan.

West Michigan produced a total of **20,875** postsecondary graduates

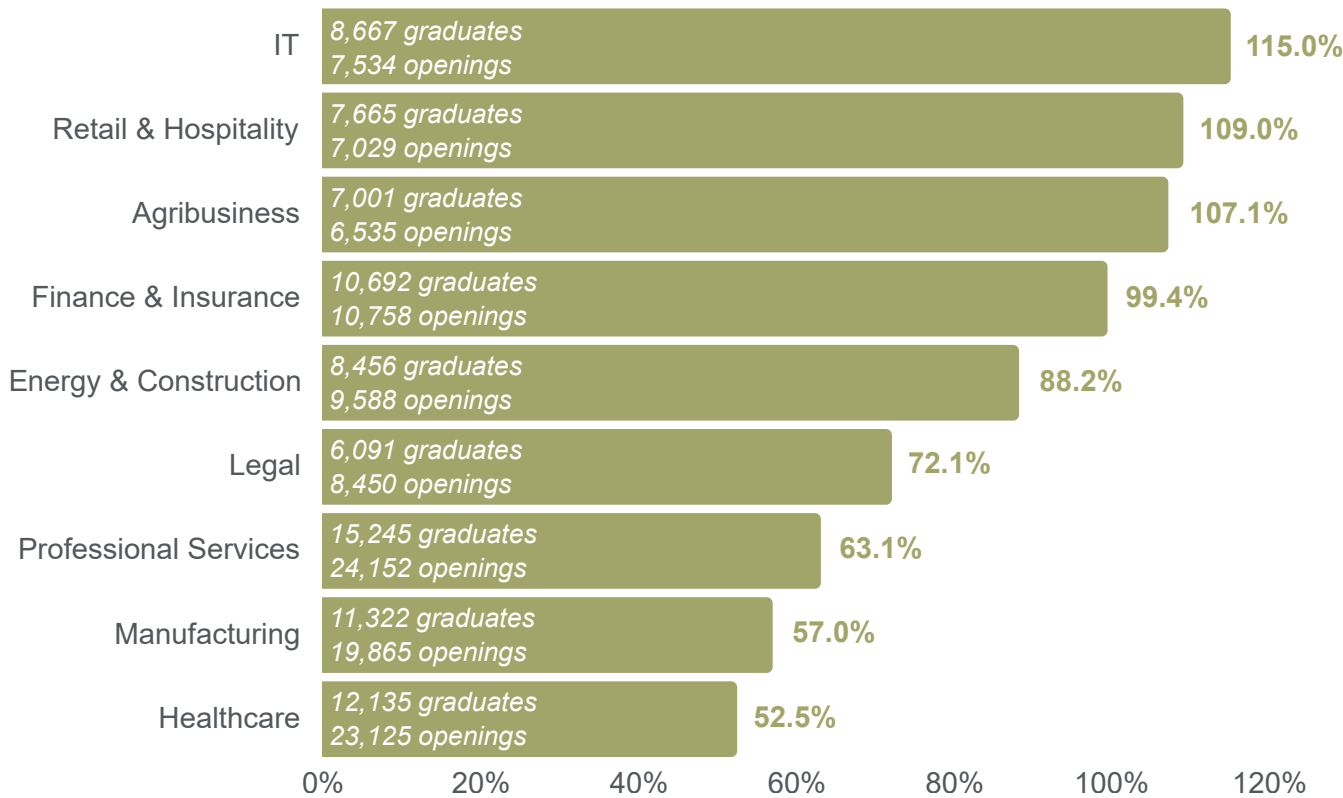
51,985 job openings requiring credentials.

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Graduate supply

Compared with employer demand by industry

Graduate Supply Relative to Employer Demand by Industry, West Michigan
2024



How to read this chart: Each percentage compares the number of graduates earning credentials related to an industry's core occupations with employer demand for those occupations. Because many credentials prepare graduates for work across sectors, the same graduate may be relevant to more than one industry. A result above 100% indicates sufficient overall credential volume, not necessarily a match for every role or skill required.

The regional average of **40.2%** provides a critical baseline for West Michigan's overall talent health. This figure is significantly lower than the individual sector ratings because it encompasses the full breadth of the regional economy — including thousands of job openings in niche, emerging, or non-technical industries that lack a direct, formalized graduate pipeline. While specific sectors may show higher alignment, the broader market is competing for a remarkably thin pool of credentialed talent.

For sectors like **IT (115.0%)**, **Retail & Hospitality (109.0%)**, and **Agribusiness (107.1%)**, the data depicts a theoretical "best-case scenario" that assumes every graduate is a perfect fit for their respective industry. In reality, this perceived surplus is often illusory; many graduates possess generalist credentials that are redundant for the specific, high-complexity roles currently in demand. This Redundancy-Scarcity Gap means that while the total volume of graduates is high, the subset of candidates possessing the precise technical skills required for modern operations remains dangerously scarce.

Conversely, core industries such as **Healthcare (52.5%)** and **Manufacturing (57.0%)** face deep structural supply deficits. In these highly regulated and technically demanding fields, the speed of industrial transformation is far outstripping the pace of graduation, leaving local employers to compete for roughly half the talent they require to operate at full capacity. This gap is further compounded by a regional decline in postsecondary enrollment, suggesting that these talent shortages will continue to intensify unless there is a fundamental shift in how West Michigan identifies and develops its workforce.

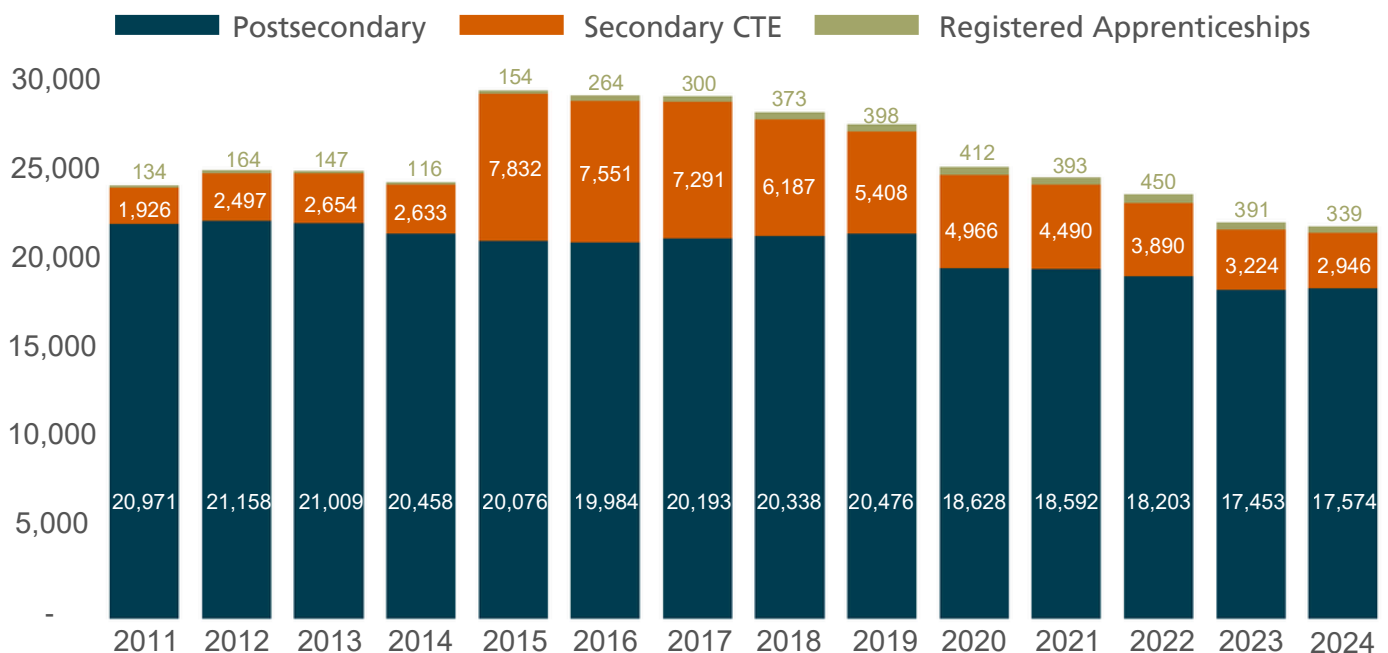
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Skilled talent shortfall

Credential decline undermines growth

West Michigan has experienced a notable **16.2% decline in postsecondary credentials awarded since 2011**, reflecting demographic trends, changing enrollment patterns, and evolving student preferences. Over the same period, **credentials earned through secondary CTE programs increased by 53%**, while **registered apprenticeship completions grew by 153%**. These trends point to growing momentum in applied, career-connected pathways, even as overall postsecondary credential production declines.

Credential Attainment by Education and Training Pathway, West Michigan 2011–2024



West Michigan's talent pipelines are producing fewer traditional credentials, contributing to constraints in talent supply across professional and operational roles. Despite sustained demand for managerial and specialized roles, the ongoing decline in post-secondary enrollment is creating talent shortages across all major industries.

While vocational training and apprenticeship programs are gaining momentum, they have yet to reach the scale required to offset accelerating retirements or keep pace with technological shifts. Without deeper investment in applied learning and K–12 college and career awareness, a widening structural gap threatens the region's long-term economic vitality.

Decline in
postsecondary
completions since
2011
-16.2%

Increase in secondary
Career & Technical
Education (CTE)
completions since 2011:
+53%

Increase in registered
apprenticeship
completions since
2011:
+153%

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Where are the gaps?



STEM

engineering, computing, data, technology, science, analytics, software, systems, cybersecurity, research, etc.

1 graduate for every 2 job openings requiring a credential



-1% decline in graduates since 2010



+12% growth in demand since 2010



Skilled Trades & Applied Tech

installation, maintenance, repair, construction, manufacturing, technical support, automation, etc.

1 graduate for every 3 job openings requiring a credential



+3% growth in graduates since 2010



+15% growth in demand since 2010



Business

management, administration, operations, finance, consulting, analysis, strategy, coordination, leadership, etc.

2 graduates for every 1 job opening requiring a credential



-6% decline in graduates since 2010



+53% growth in demand since 2010



Social Sciences & Humanities

research, communication, writing, design, education, analysis, content, media, policy, user experience, etc.

1 graduate for every 3 job openings requiring a credential



-7% decline in graduates since 2010



+12% growth in demand since 2010

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

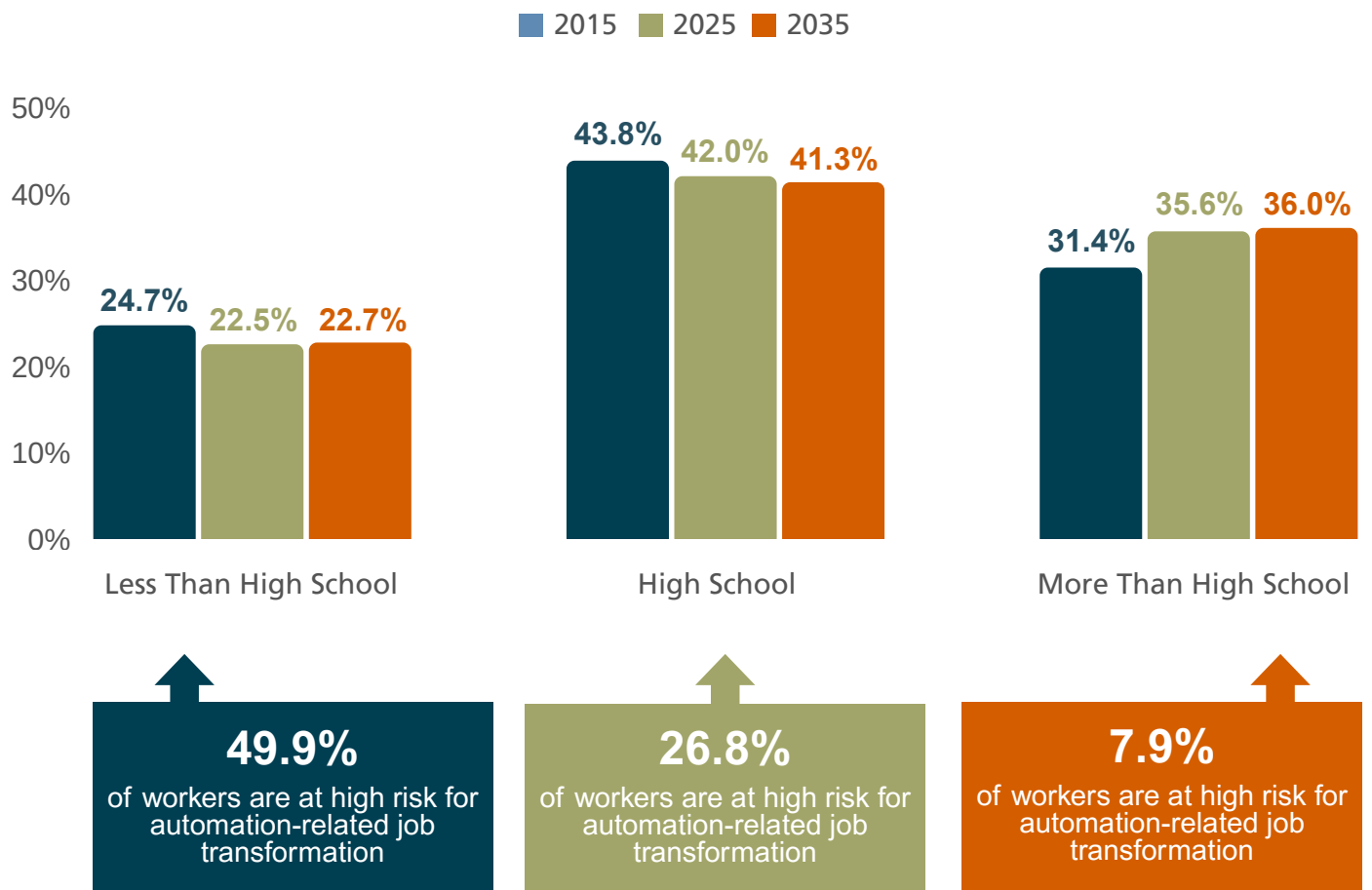
Credential demand

Rising threshold for entry-level talent

Demand for postsecondary education continues to accelerate across West Michigan, raising the threshold for entry into a growing share of jobs. By 2035, more than one-third of regional roles (36.0%) will require education beyond high school, while employment in lower-skill positions continues to decline. This trend reflects **structural changes in how work is performed and scaled — not arbitrary degree inflation — driven by increased complexity, risk, and integration across industries.**

As technology, automation, and data-driven processes reshape managerial, analytical, and technical roles, **entry-level workers increasingly need strong foundational skills, including problem-solving, digital literacy, and adaptability.** In this context, postsecondary credentials function less as signaling devices and more as indicators of readiness for complex, evolving work environments. For educators and workforce leaders, this underscores the need to **emphasize alignment and applicability through stackable credentials, applied learning, and continuous upskilling pathways** that widen access while meeting higher entry requirements.

Employment by Typical Education Required for Entry, West Michigan

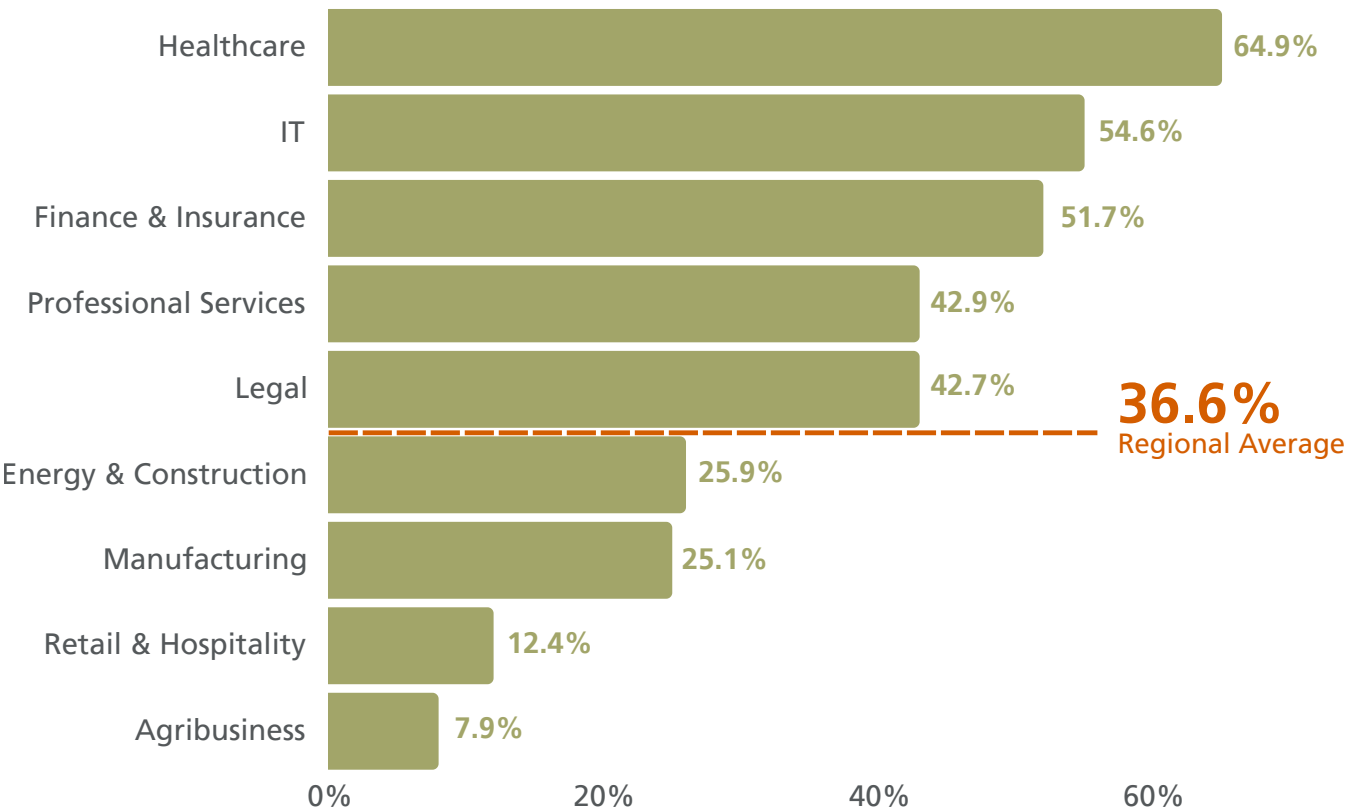


Lightcast, Staffing Patterns (2015-2035)

Credential demand

By industry

Share of Jobs Requiring Education Beyond High School by Industry, West Michigan
2025



West Michigan’s educational landscape is increasingly defined by industries like **Healthcare (64.9%)**, **IT (54.6%)**, and **Finance (51.7%)**, where the necessity for postsecondary credentials is driven by life-critical technical standards and rigorous regulatory cycles. This demand extends naturally into **Professional Services (42.9%)** and **Legal (42.7%)**, as these sectors pivot away from administrative support toward roles requiring high-level strategic and analytical capabilities.

While traditional sectors like **Manufacturing (25.1%)** and **Agribusiness (7.9%)** have historically relied on vocational experience, they are now facing the most intense pressure to upskill as manual processes are rapidly replaced by AI-driven systems and sophisticated automation.

As the region transitions into a more advanced economic state, this structural shift makes upskilling a foundational mandate rather than a secondary goal for regional stability. Consequently, sustaining West Michigan’s competitive advantage requires a workforce that can bridge the gap between legacy operational knowledge and the advanced technical literacy demanded by a modern, automated society.

Upskilling is a
foundational
mandate, not a
secondary goal

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

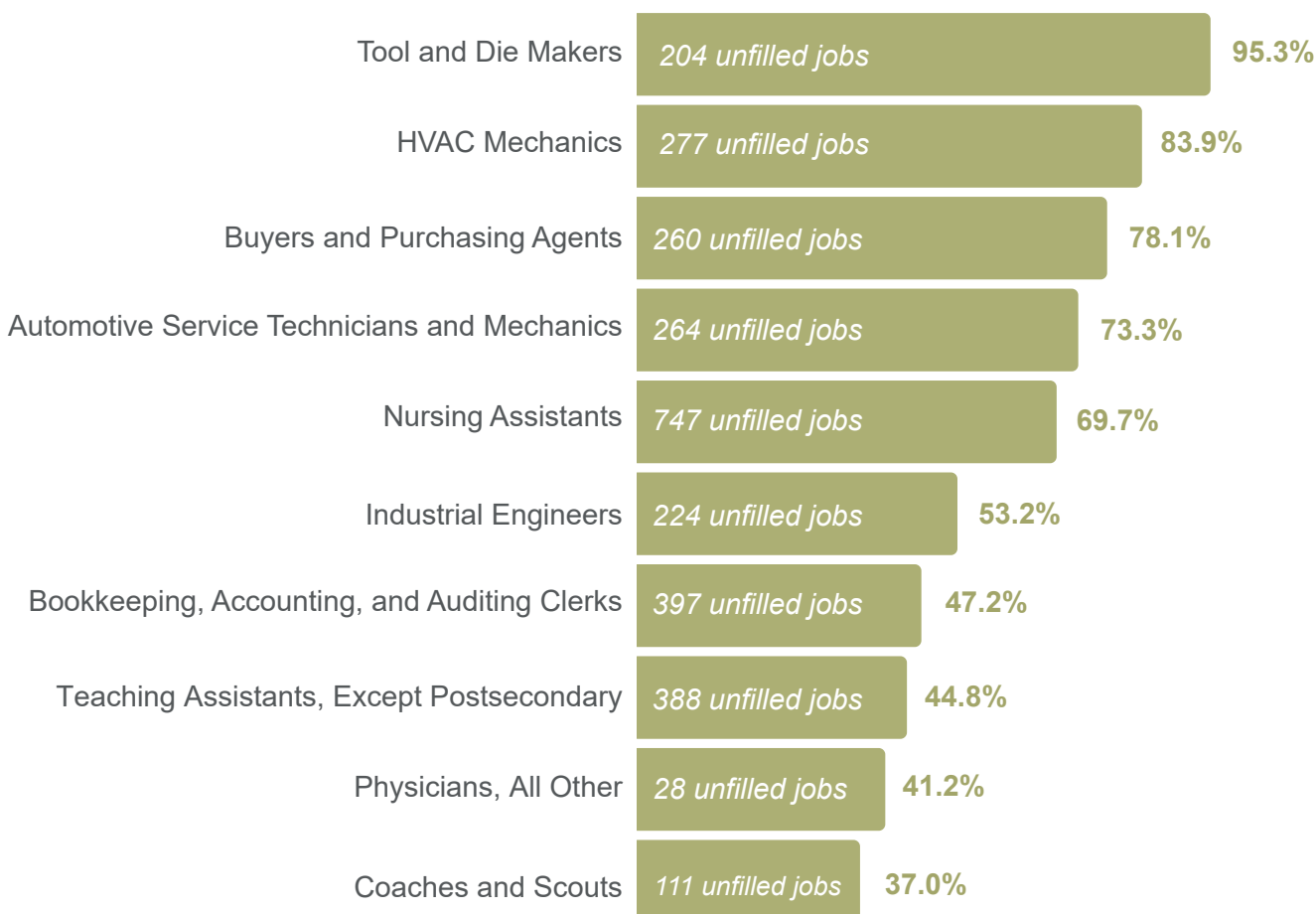
Critical shortages

Where graduate supply trails demand

West Michigan's talent pipeline is not keeping pace with the speed and scale of employer demand. In 2024, **nearly one-third of all job openings exceeded the available supply of graduates**, with the most severe gaps concentrated in the core business, operational, and technical roles that sustain the regional economy. Highly specialized occupations such as Tool and Die Makers (95.3% unmet demand), HVAC Mechanics (83.9%), and Purchasing Agents (78.1%) face the largest imbalances between graduate output and hiring needs, while essential service roles — including Automotive Technicians (73.3%) and Nursing Assistants (69.7%) — show similarly pronounced shortfalls.

These gaps are not cyclical — they reflect **broader structural challenges in aligning education, training pathways, and labor market demand in a rapidly changing economy**. As a result, employers are competing for a limited pool of qualified talent, constraining industrial capacity, slowing operational continuity, and limiting the region's ability to sustain long-term economic growth.

Top 10 Occupations, Percent of Job Openings Unmet by Graduate Supply, West Michigan 2024



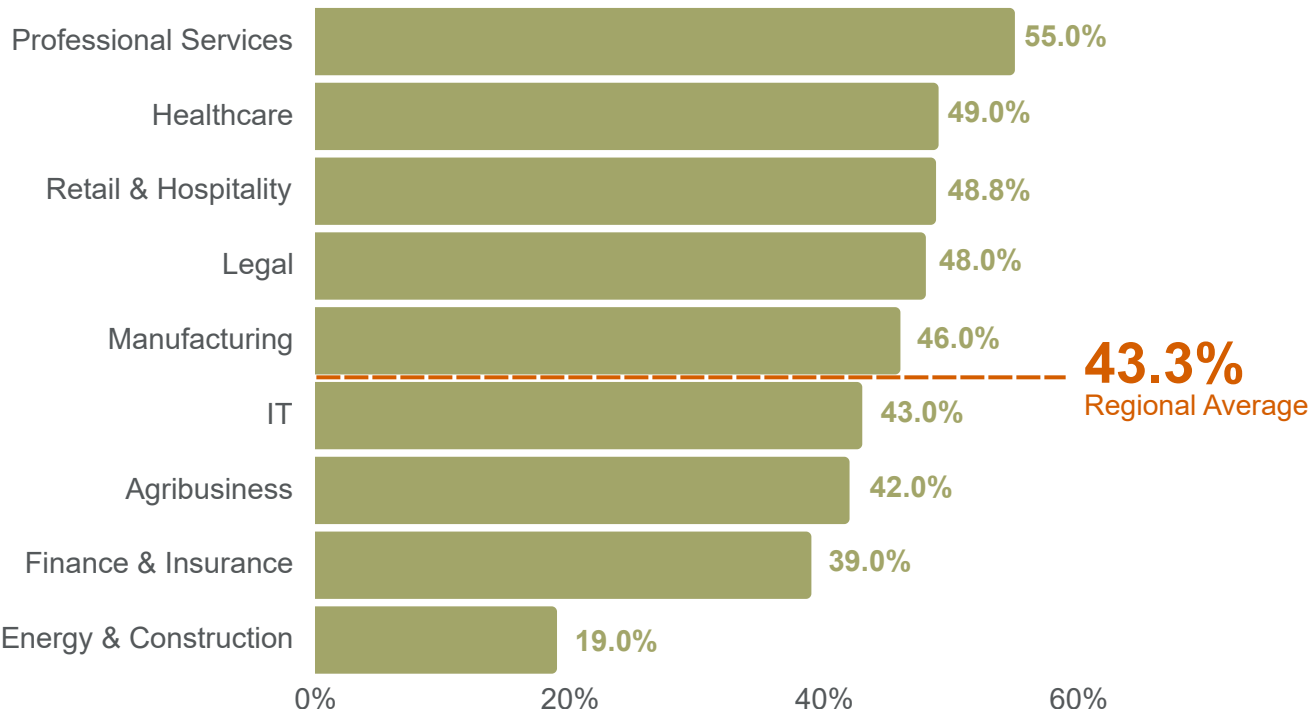
National Center For Educational Statistics, IPEDS (2024); LightCast, Industry Table (2024)

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Critical shortages

By industry

Percent of Job Openings Unmet by Graduate Supply by Industry, West Michigan
2024



Professional Services has the largest share of openings unmet by related graduate supply (55.0%), followed by Healthcare (49.0%), Retail & Hospitality (48.8%), Legal (48.0%), and Manufacturing (46.0%). These industries face different pressures, but **each is drawing from a graduate pool that is not keeping pace with measured employer demand**. In high-volume sectors, competition for shared talent compounds the challenge, while retirement exposure and specialized skill requirements further constrain supply in technical and experience-intensive roles.

By contrast, Energy & Construction has the smallest gap (19.0%), suggesting stronger alignment between employer demand and **earn-and-learn pathways that allow workers to build skills while employed**. Through secondary CTE, Registered Apprenticeships, and postsecondary partnerships, the sector can prepare workers without requiring education and employment to occur as separate, sequential steps. This approach gives employers a more direct role in developing talent while reducing the time and financial barriers workers face in gaining industry-relevant skills. Expanding similar work-based pathways across other industries could help increase entry into skilled roles and improve alignment between training and changing employer needs.

INDUSTRIES FACE MULTIPLE CHALLENGES TO FILL ROLES

Intense competition for credentialed candidates

Demographic transition due to retirements and low birth rates

Training pathways lag rapidly evolving skill requirements

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Growth in demand

Outpaces growth in supply for credentials

The ten most critical occupations across West Michigan reveal widening gaps between annual job postings and total credential completions since 2015. Employer demand has surged far faster than graduate supply across nearly every managerial role — from **Sales Managers (+246%)** and **Project Management Specialists (+118%)** to **Marketing Managers (+136.2%)** and **Human Resources Managers (+111%)**. Even senior leadership positions such as **General and Operations Managers (+14.0%)** show consistent growth, signaling mounting talent strain across all tiers of the regional workforce. This persistent imbalance underscores the urgent need to expand professional training capacity, strengthen recruitment pipelines, and improve retention — or risk continued shortages across the management, operational, and technical functions that drive the regional economy.

Difference in Openings vs. Completions Growth, West Michigan Indexed to 2015



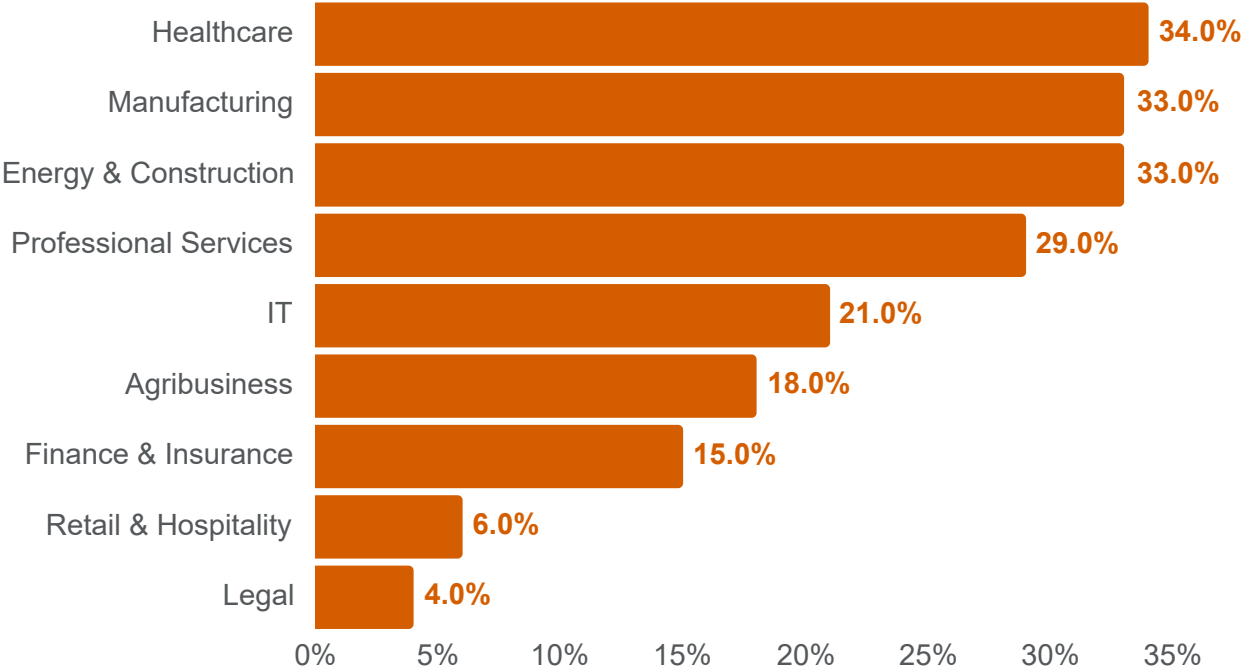
National Center For Educational Statistics, IPEDS (2015-2024); LightCast, Industry Table (2015-2024)

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Postings vs. completions

By industry

Gap Between Job Postings and Credential Completions by Industry (%), West Michigan 2024



The gap between job postings and credential completions in West Michigan reflects a **structural imbalance between rapidly evolving industry demand and the capacity of existing talent development systems — including education, training providers, and employers — to respond at the same pace.** Healthcare (34.0%), Manufacturing (33.0%), and Energy & Construction (33.0%) top the list, driven by a combination of **demographic pressures**, including an aging workforce nearing retirement, and **growing demand for highly specialized technical roles** that require extended training timelines.

Conversely, fields such as Legal (4.0%) and Finance (15.0%) show smaller gaps, in part due to **greater adoption of automation and AI**, which has reshaped demand in those occupations. Business and Management (21.0%) and Agriculture (18.0%) fall in the middle, where **emerging roles and alternative credential pathways are still being defined and measured**, particularly for non-traditional and work-based learning models.

Ultimately, these trends point to a **shared opportunity across employers, education providers, and workforce partners to better align program design, delivery models, and credential pathways with changing labor market needs.** While West Michigan continues to grow, physical and technical industries face increasing pressure as demand for specialized talent outpaces current production capacity.

Regional Pressures Include:



Rapid industrial growth



Aging workforce



Demand for high skilled roles

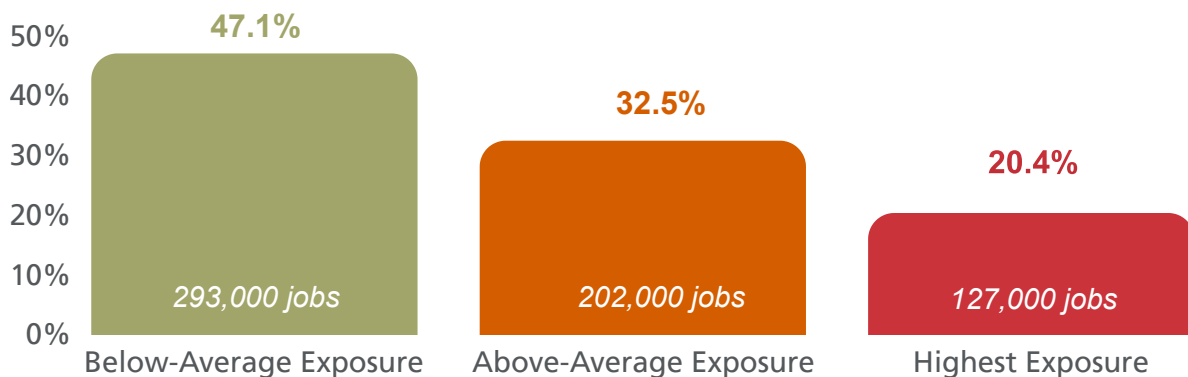
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Technology-driven disruption

AI and automation reshaping work across the region

AI and automation have the potential to reshape work across a broad segment of West Michigan's economy. **More than half of employment, 52.9%, is concentrated in occupations with above-average exposure, representing approximately 328,000 jobs.** Within this group, one in five jobs, or approximately 127,000 positions, fall into the highest exposure tier, where the potential for significant changes to tasks, workflows, and skill requirements is greatest.

Employment by AI + Automation Exposure Level, West Michigan 2025



Note: Exposure measures how much of an occupation's work could be performed, supported, or changed by AI and automation. Higher exposure signals greater potential for task and role transformation, not expected job loss. Figures reflect occupations with available exposure scores.

Exposure extends across both cognitive and operational work. AI can support activities such as analysis, documentation, communication, information retrieval, and decision-making, while automation can reshape transactions, production processes, quality control, and other structured workflows. **The scale of potential transformation is significant, but the nature and intensity of change will vary by occupation and employer.**

Exposure does not mean that a job will disappear or that every task within it can be automated. It indicates that technology could perform, support, or significantly change more of the work within an occupation. In many cases, jobs will remain while responsibilities shift toward judgment, problem-solving, relationships, oversight, and applied expertise.

For employers, this presents an immediate workforce-planning challenge. Organizations must determine which tasks to automate, where technology can augment employees, and how roles and training should evolve. **The central challenge is not simply anticipating job loss. It is redesigning work while preparing employees to succeed within it.**

THE PATH FORWARD

The clear imperative is to invest in upskilling, digital readiness, and career mobility to equip workers for more resilient, AI-augmented roles.

TalentFirst author calculations using Lightcast 2025 occupational employment data and a composite exposure measure informed by Eloundou et al. (2024), Felten, Raj, and Seamans (2021), and Frey and Osborne (2017). Exposure reflects the potential for AI and automation to perform, support, or change occupational tasks, not predicted job loss.

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

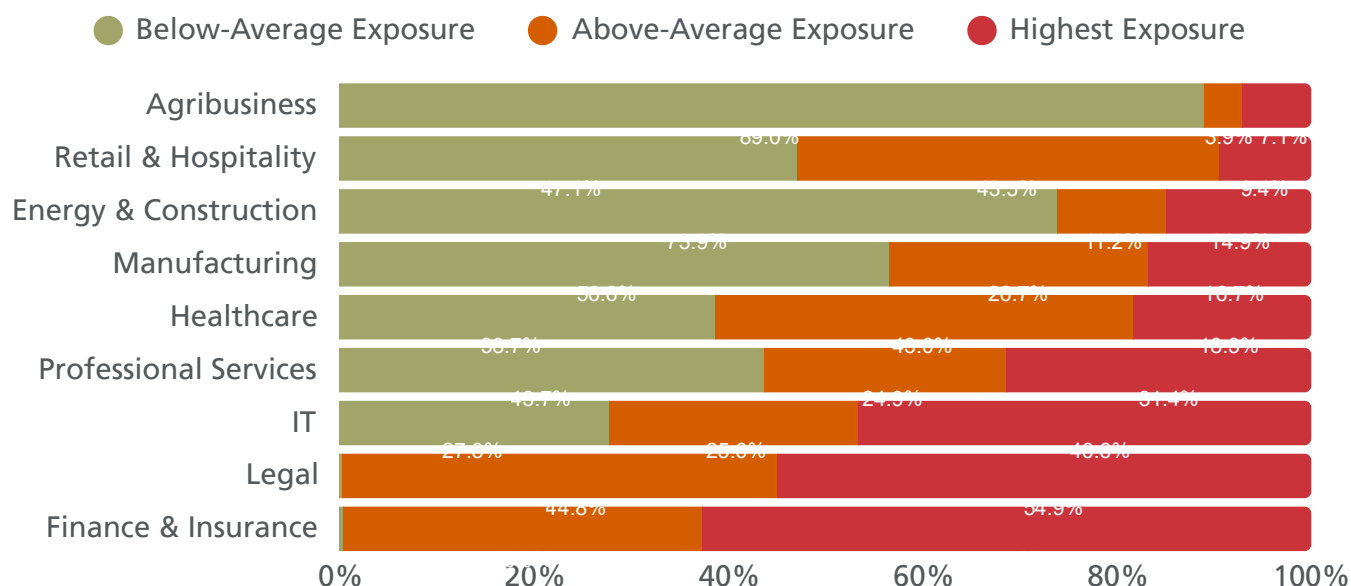
Technology-driven disruption

Exposure concentrated in information-intensive work

The potential impact of AI and automation varies substantially across industries because each industry employs a different mix of occupations and performs different types of work. **Finance & Insurance has the most concentrated exposure profile**, with 63% of employment in the highest exposure band. IT follows at 47%, while Professional Services has 31% of employment in the highest exposure band.

These industries depend heavily on data processing, documentation, analysis, communication, software, and standardized transactions. Current AI capabilities overlap more directly with these digitally mediated tasks than with work requiring continuous physical execution in variable environments.

AI + Automation Exposure Profile by Industry, West Michigan 2025



Healthcare presents a more mixed profile. Approximately 43% of employment falls in the above-average band and 18% in the highest exposure band. Administrative, records-management, documentation, analytical, and coordination functions may be particularly affected, while direct care continues to depend heavily on physical execution, professional judgment, trust, and interpersonal interaction.

Manufacturing also faces a mixed form of transformation. Traditional automation can reshape production and material-handling tasks, while AI can affect engineering, planning, maintenance, quality control, logistics, and administrative work. Energy & Construction and Agribusiness show lower overall exposure because much of their employment is concentrated in site-based and physically variable work. Even within those industries, planning, estimating, equipment monitoring, design, and operational coordination may change.

The type of exposure matters as much as the overall level. Employers should evaluate exposure at the task and workflow level rather than assume that every occupation or industry will experience technology in the same way.

TalentFirst author calculations using Lightcast 2025 occupational employment data and a composite exposure measure informed by Eloundou et al. (2024), Felten, Raj, and Seamans (2021), and Frey and Osborne (2017). Exposure reflects the potential for AI and automation to perform, support, or change occupational tasks, not predicted job loss.

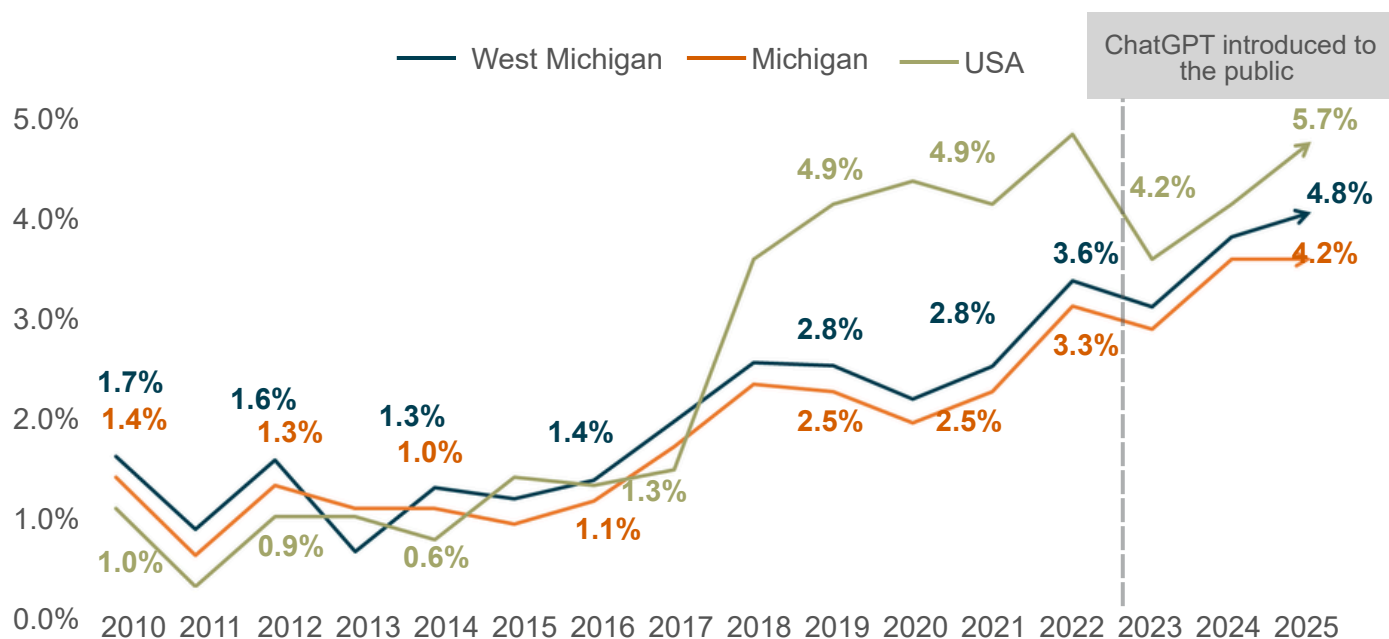
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

AI adoption

West Michigan leads state, trails nation

AI adoption across West Michigan's labor market is keeping pace with national trends—but not exceeding them. Mentions of AI-related skills in job postings have risen to 4.8% in 2025, closely tracking the national average of 5.7%. This alignment indicates that while the region is participating in broader technological shifts, **West Michigan is not yet differentiating itself as a leader in AI-driven transformation.**

**Share of STEM Job Postings
Mentioning AI Skills**
2010-2025



Lightcast, Job Posting Analytics (2010-2025)

The implication is clear: **maintaining parity will not be sufficient to sustain long-term competitiveness.** Nationally, organizations are embedding AI across management, operations, logistics, and technical infrastructure, fundamentally reshaping how work is performed and where value is created. For West Michigan, future growth will depend on **moving beyond adoption toward strategic integration** — building capacity in advanced analytics, automated systems, and technology-enabled operations.

Without this shift, the region risks remaining a **fast follower in AI adoption**, limiting its ability to capture gains in productivity, innovation, and higher-value job creation. With deliberate investment, however, West Michigan can position itself to **lead in applied, industry-driven AI adoption**, particularly within its core manufacturing and operational sectors.

Clear trends in the region due to automation/AI:

Routine work is being automated; value is shifting to human + tech roles

Competitive advantage will depend on integrating technology with talent

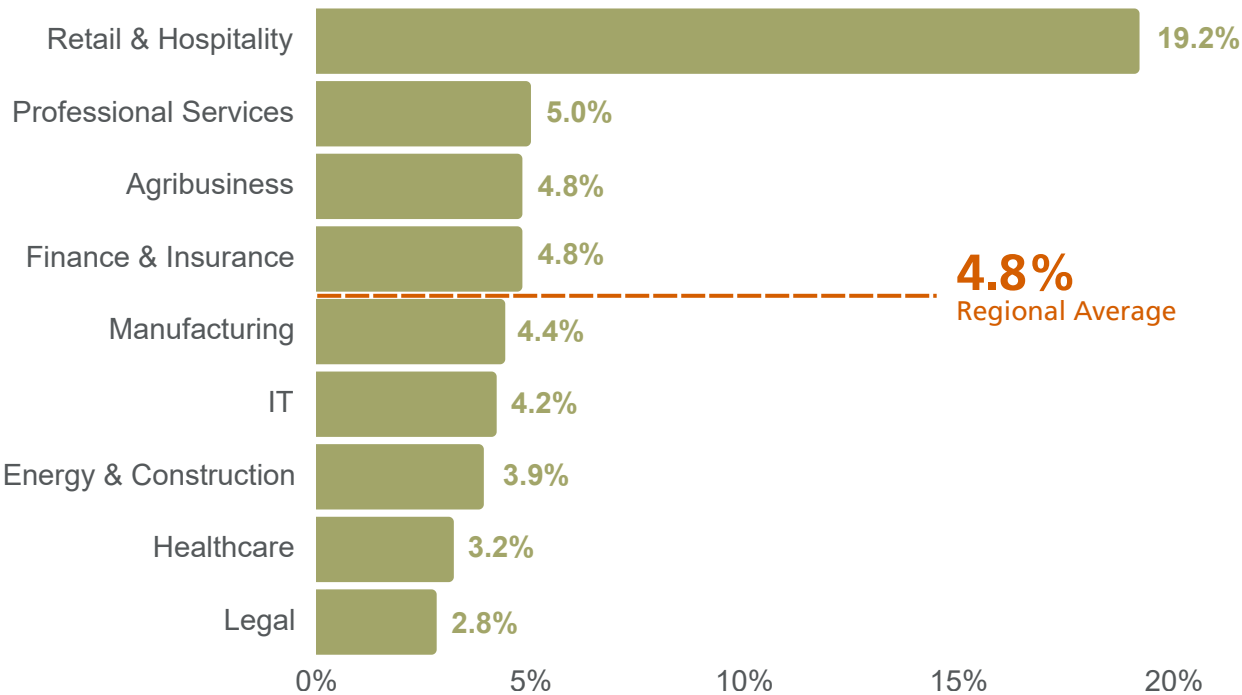
Roles are evolving faster than traditional job structures

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

AI adoption

By industry

Share of STEM Job Postings Mentioning AI Skills by Industry
West Michigan
2025



West Michigan’s **Retail & Hospitality sector stands out as a clear outlier in AI-related STEM hiring demand**, with 19.2% of postings referencing AI skills — well above the regional average of 4.8%. This gap suggests that employers in the sector are **translating AI adoption into workforce requirements faster than most other industries**, particularly in **customer-facing and process-driven functions**. Professional Services (5.0%) and Finance (4.8%) sit closer to the regional baseline, reflecting a **more steady integration of AI into analytical, advisory, and operational workflows**.

By contrast, Healthcare (3.2%) and Legal (2.8%) remain below the regional average, pointing to a **more measured pace of AI adoption** in fields shaped by **regulatory complexity, risk management, and the continued importance of human judgment**. Overall, the pattern suggests that West Michigan’s AI talent demand is **concentrated in sectors where the business case for efficiency, scale, and workflow automation is most immediate**.

Job Postings Across Sectors -
Highest, Lowest & Average for West Michigan:

HIGHEST: RETAIL & HOSPITALITY 19.2%	REGIONAL AVERAGE: 4.8%	LOWEST: LEGAL 2.8%
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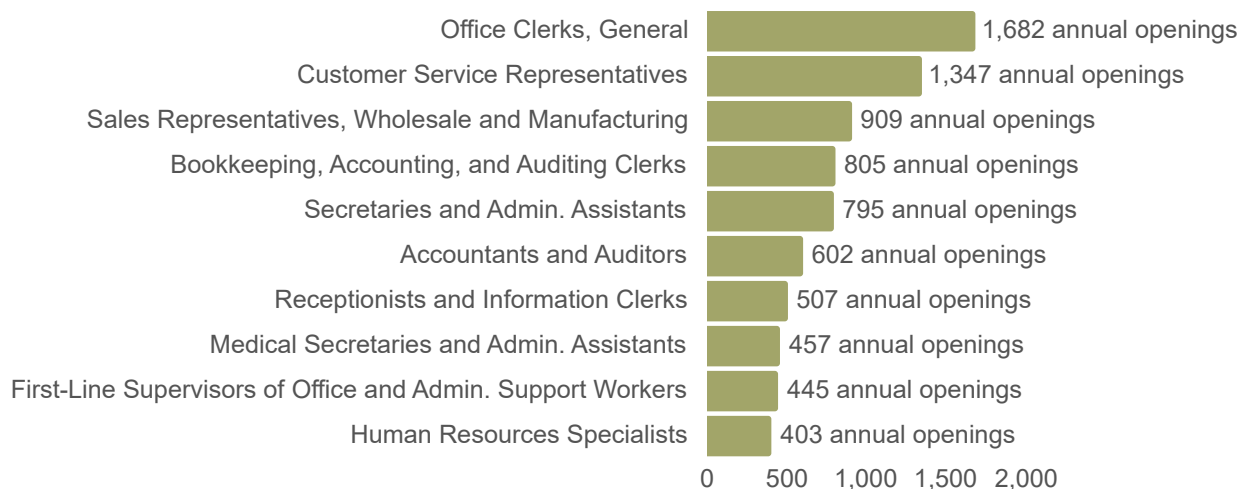
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Demand amid disruption

Employers must continue hiring while redesigning highly exposed roles

High exposure does not eliminate the need to recruit. West Michigan employers continue to generate significant annual demand for office clerks, customer service representatives, sales representatives, bookkeepers, administrative assistants, accountants, receptionists, medical administrative staff, office supervisors, and human resources specialists, even though these occupations fall within the highest AI and automation exposure band.

High-Demand Occupations in the Highest AI + Automation Exposure Band, West Michigan 2025



This overlap creates a dual workforce challenge. **Employers must fill essential positions today while redesigning how those positions create value tomorrow.** Organizations cannot assume that technology will eliminate immediate hiring needs, nor can they continue recruiting for roles as if their tasks and skill requirements will remain unchanged.

The greatest exposure is concentrated in work involving document production, data entry, record maintenance, routine communication, transaction processing, scheduling, reporting, and information retrieval. Technology may increasingly perform or accelerate these activities. Human responsibilities may shift toward exception handling, relationship management, judgment, quality assurance, problem-solving, and accountability. The implications extend beyond entry-level work. Accountants, human resources specialists, office supervisors, and other professional roles also contain significant volumes of technology-exposed tasks. **AI and automation are likely to change the allocation of work within occupations, not simply separate jobs into those that survive and those that disappear.**

12,700

annual openings in occupations with the highest AI + automation exposure

The organizations best positioned to benefit will redesign work and develop talent concurrently. That means using technology to reduce repetitive activity while preparing employees for more complex, productive, and decision-intensive responsibilities.

Recruitment and redesign must occur together

High-demand positions still need to be filled while their tasks and skill requirements evolve.

Entry-level work may be reconfigured

As routine tasks decline, employers will need to preserve on-ramps through redesigned roles and work-based learning

Productivity gains require workforce investment

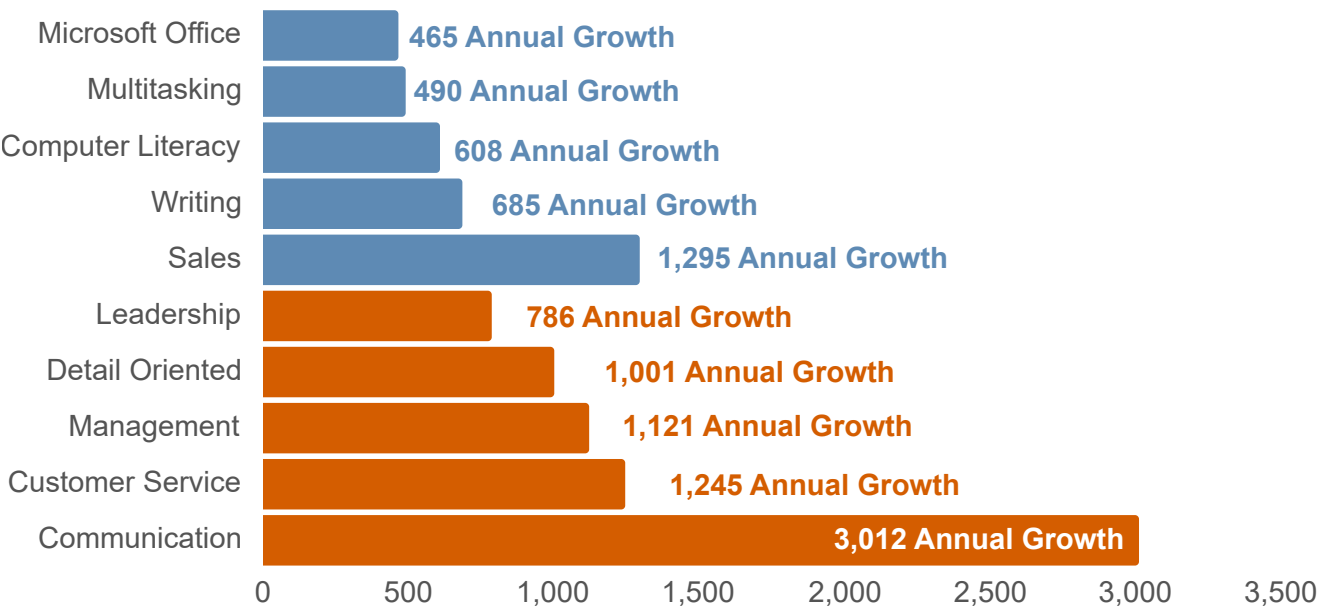
Technology produces value when implementation is paired with training, workflow redesign, and clear accountability

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Durable skills

Becoming essential for top talent

Top 5 High-Growth Non-Durable vs. Durable Skills, West Michigan
2020-2025



Lightcast, Job Posting Analytics (2020-2025)

Communication has emerged as the most in-demand durable skill in West Michigan’s labor market, appearing 3,012 more times in job postings in 2024 than in 2020. This growth reflects an increasing need for cross-functional coordination, client engagement, and operational alignment as roles become more integrated across business functions. Other durable skills — including customer service (+1,245), management (+1,121), and detail orientation (+1,001) — have also seen significant growth, reinforcing the importance of employees who can navigate complexity, collaborate effectively, and operate across diverse teams and stakeholders.

These trends point to a broader shift: durable skills are becoming a critical constraint in workforce performance. While technical capabilities can often be developed or supplemented over time, skills such as communication, adaptability, and reliability directly impact execution, productivity, and team effectiveness. As a result, employers are placing increasing value on candidates who can translate technical knowledge into action, work across functions, and contribute to organizational agility.

Durable skills can be:



WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Wage plateau

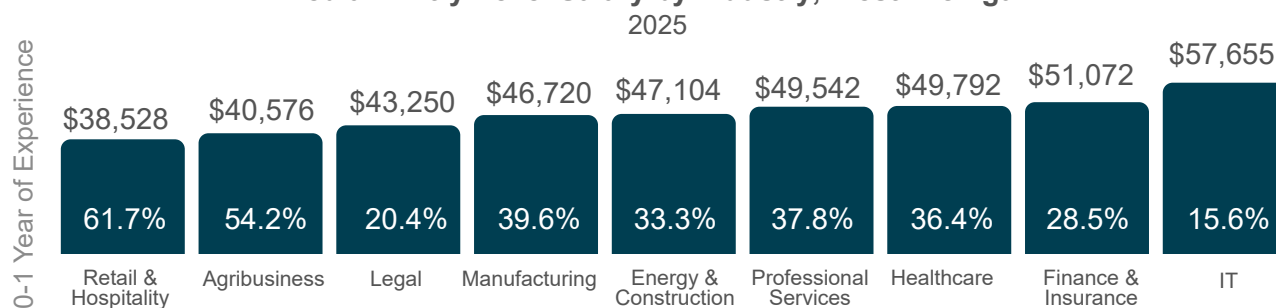
Late-in-career earnings fall short

West Michigan offers a strong early-career earnings foundation, with competitive starting wages across industries such as Finance (\$51,072) and Healthcare (\$49,792). However, this advantage does not consistently carry forward. Across several core industries — including Manufacturing and Professional Services — **wage growth slows in mid- and late-career stages, creating a gap between early momentum and long-term earning potential.**

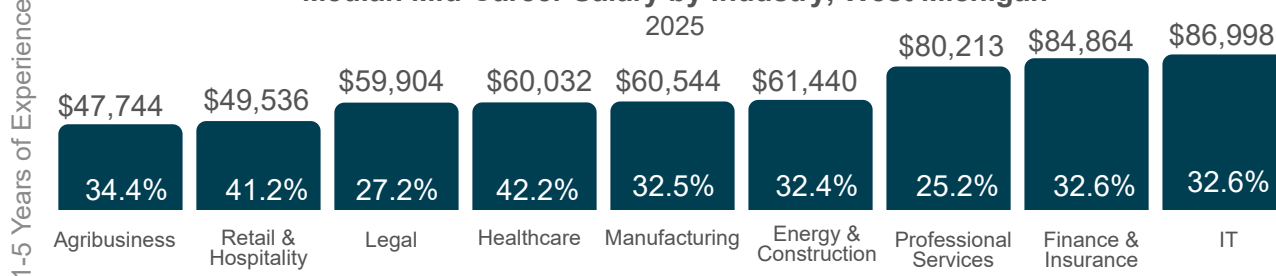
This pattern introduces a meaningful business risk. **When compensation growth does not keep pace with experience, retention becomes more difficult**, particularly for experienced workers who have the greatest impact on productivity, leadership, and operational continuity. In contrast, sectors such as IT and Finance & Insurance demonstrate **stronger long-term wage progression**, reinforcing their ability to attract and retain high-skill talent over time.

The implication is clear: **competitive entry wages alone are not sufficient to sustain a stable, experienced workforce.** Employers will need to **strengthen mid- and late-career pathways**, aligning compensation growth with skill accumulation and responsibility. Without this, the region risks **losing experienced talent at peak productivity**, weakening both organizational performance and long-term economic resilience.

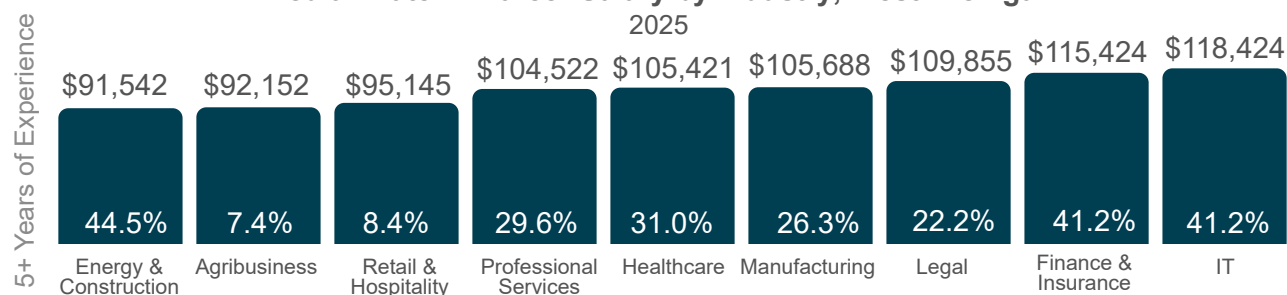
Median Entry-Level Salary by Industry, West Michigan



Median Mid-Career Salary by Industry, West Michigan



Median Late-in-Career Salary by Industry, West Michigan



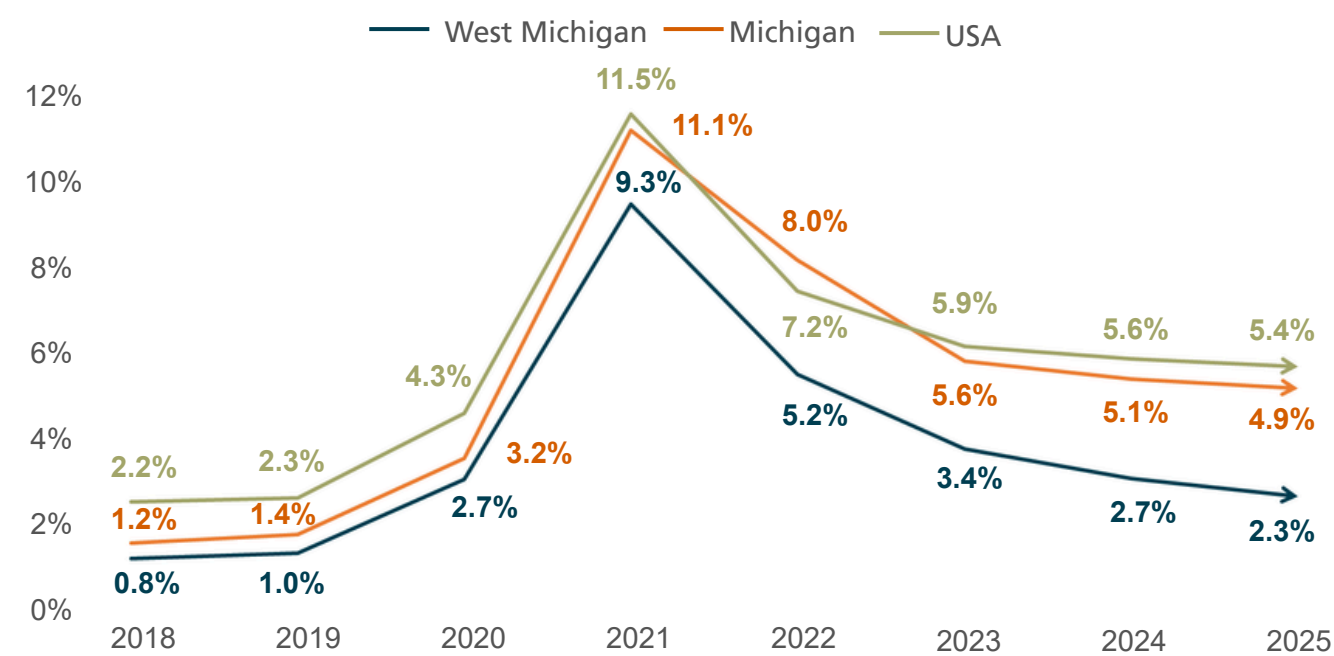
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Remote work remains

Driving outsized impacts on wages

Remote job postings surged during the pandemic, peaking in 2021 at 9.3% in West Michigan and 11.1% statewide. Although demand for remote roles has moderated, it remains **structurally above pre-pandemic levels**, with 2.3% of postings in West Michigan still offering remote work in 2025. This trails the statewide average of 4.9%, reflecting the region’s **greater concentration in in-person industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, and skilled trades**.

Share of Job Postings Open to Remote Workers, West Michigan
2018-2025



Median Advertised Salary by Experience, Remote vs. Non-Remote
2025



Lightcast, Job Posting Analytics (2018-2025)

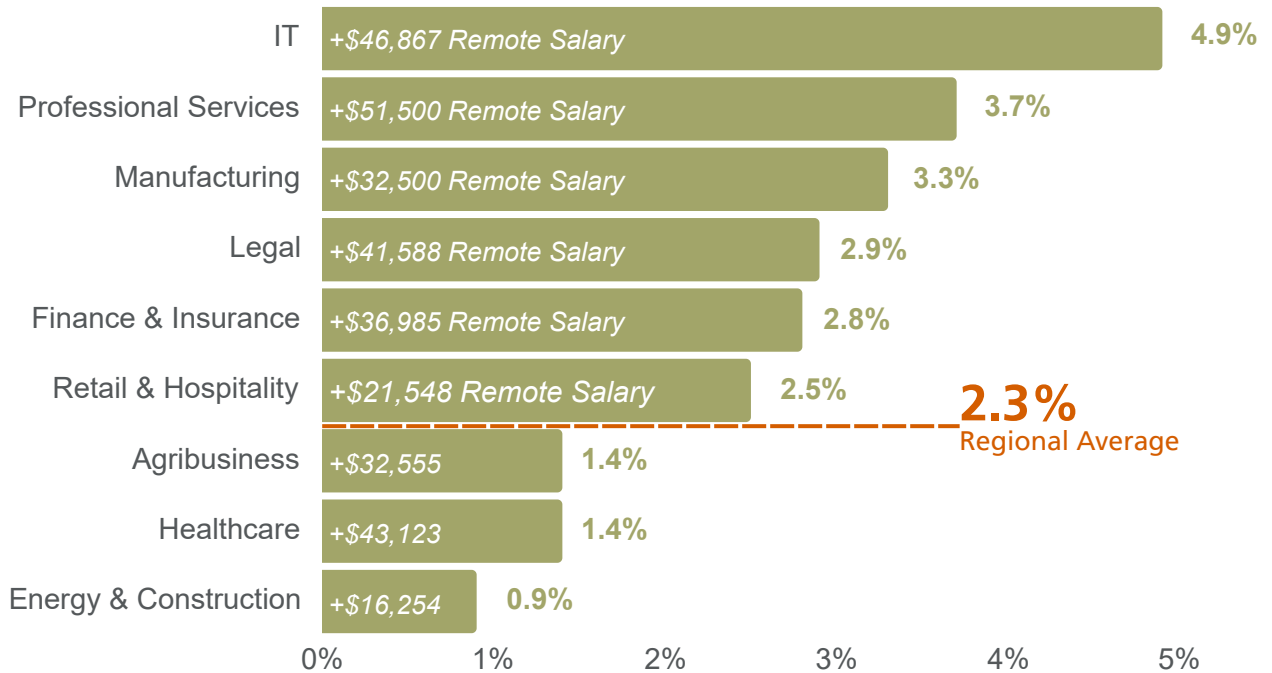


WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Remote work

By industry

Share of Job Postings Open to Remote Workers by Industry, West Michigan
2025



Remote work in West Michigan is most concentrated in **IT (4.9%)** and **Professional Services (3.7%)**, where **digitally enabled workflows support more flexible, location-agnostic talent models**. Manufacturing (3.3%) also exceeds the 2.3% regional average, reflecting the **growing digitization of design, engineering, and supply chain functions**, which can increasingly be performed off-site.

By contrast, industries such as Healthcare (1.4%), Agribusiness (1.4%), and Energy & Construction (0.9%) remain **firmly tied to physical worksites**, where **in-person execution is core to service delivery and operations**.

The presence of **significant salary premiums for remote roles** — reaching **+\$51,500 in Professional Services** — **signals that remote work is being used as a strategic lever to compete for specialized, high-skill talent**, often in competition with national labor markets.

Taken together, these patterns point to a structural divide: **knowledge-based roles are increasingly decoupled from local geography**, while **core operational industries remain dependent on a locally available, site-based workforce**. This dynamic has direct implications for how employers compete for talent, structure roles, and invest in workforce development.

FACTORS AFFECTING REMOTE WORK ACROSS INDUSTRIES

Remote capacity is a strategic tool used to attract specialized, senior-level talent

Knowledge-based sectors are decoupling from local geography

Physical industries continue to rely on a localized, site-present workforce

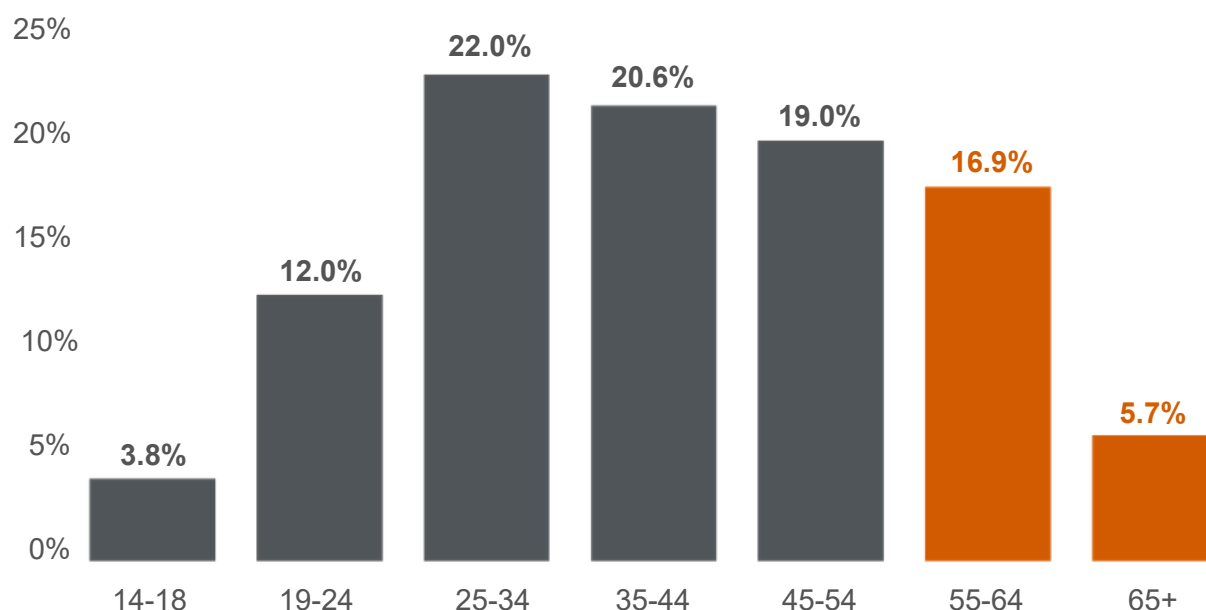
WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Retirement risk

Concentrated in skilled & technical roles

Almost **one-fifth** of West Michigan's workforce is projected to retire by 2035. Currently, **22.6%** of workers in the sector are aged 55 or older, pointing to an aging core of experienced professionals. The workforce skews middle-aged, with the largest share between ages **35–44 (20.8%)** and **25–34 (22.0%)**, while younger workers ages **14–24** make up just **15.8%** of the total — signaling limited new entry into the field. This mirrors statewide and national patterns and underscores the region's reliance on middle-aged talent, as well as the growing need to attract, train, and retain younger professionals.

Age Distribution of Workforce, West Michigan
2025



U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (2024), Lightcast (2025)

This demographic profile highlights two defining characteristics of the workforce:

- The "Peak 65" Succession Crisis: **With 22.6%** of the workforce now aged 55 and older, the region is entering a period of maximum retirement friction. This "silver tsunami" represents a massive looming exit of institutional knowledge and technical mastery that has not yet been fully captured by succession planning, creating a high-risk transition period for business continuity.
- The Technical Mid-Career Bottleneck: While the **35–44 (20.8%)** and **25–34 (22.0%)** cohorts provide a substantial numerical base, a significant portion of these workers are currently concentrated in roles that demand specialized, high-tier expertise. This creates a "bottleneck" where the mid-career layer is overburdened with operational technicality, yet restricted from effectively mentoring the next generation due to the sheer intensity of current industrial demand.



Maximum Retirement Friction

Looming exit of institutional knowledge and technical mastery

Technical Mid-Career Bottleneck

Layer overburdened with operational technicality, yet restricted from training others

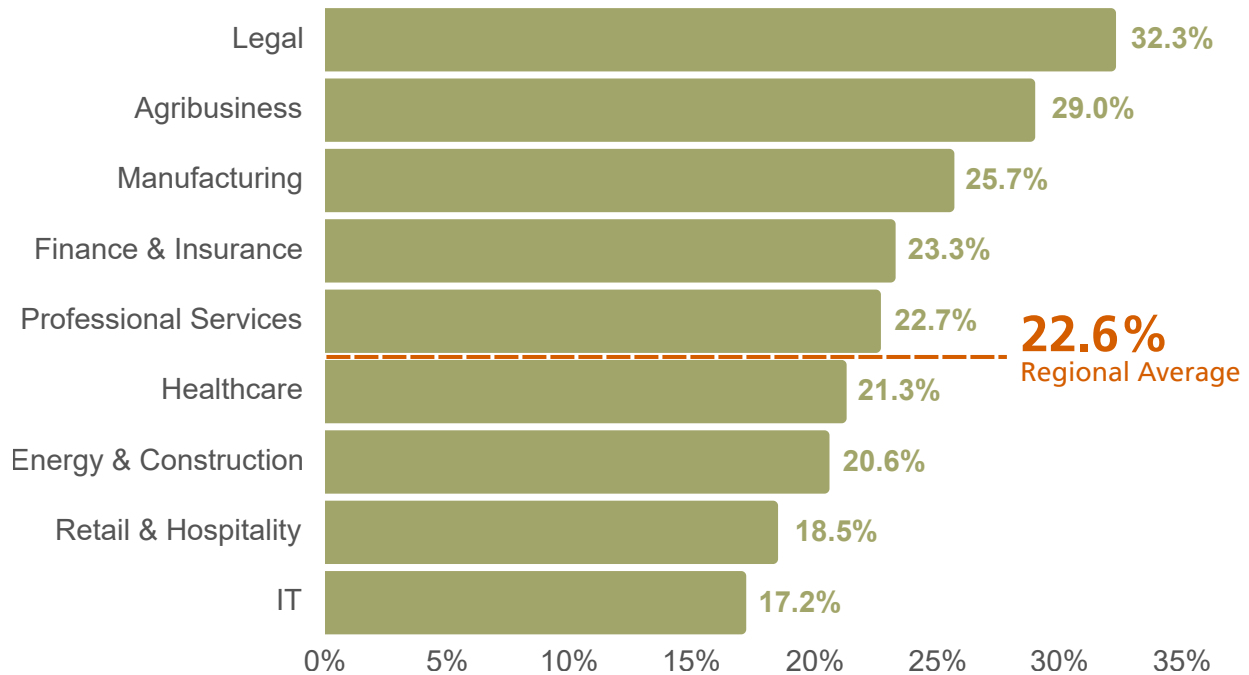


WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Retirement risk

By industry

Percent of Workforce Aged 55+ by Industry, West Michigan
2025



The high concentration of older workers in Legal (32.3%) and Agribusiness (29.0%) points to sectors where **experience, tenure, and institutional knowledge play a central role in workforce composition**. In Manufacturing (25.7%), this reflects a long-standing reliance on **skilled trades and role-specific expertise developed over extended careers**, creating a **growing succession and knowledge transfer risk** across the region's industrial base.

By contrast, IT (17.2%) and Retail & Hospitality (18.5%) skew younger, reflecting industries where **faster talent entry cycles and evolving skill requirements drive more continuous workforce turnover**.

These differences highlight a widening **experience gap across the regional economy**, where some of the most operationally critical industries face near-term pressure to retain, transfer, and replace deeply embedded expertise.

This distribution signals a clear inflection point: while parts of the economy are successfully attracting new talent, **core industries are approaching a wave of retirements that could disrupt continuity if not proactively managed**.

Addressing this challenge will require **intentional succession planning, structured knowledge transfer, and modernization of career pathways** to ensure critical capabilities are sustained.

AREAS OF STRATEGIC FOCUS ACROSS INDUSTRIES



Mentorship



Modernizing career pathways



Capturing institutional knowledge

WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

Retirement risk

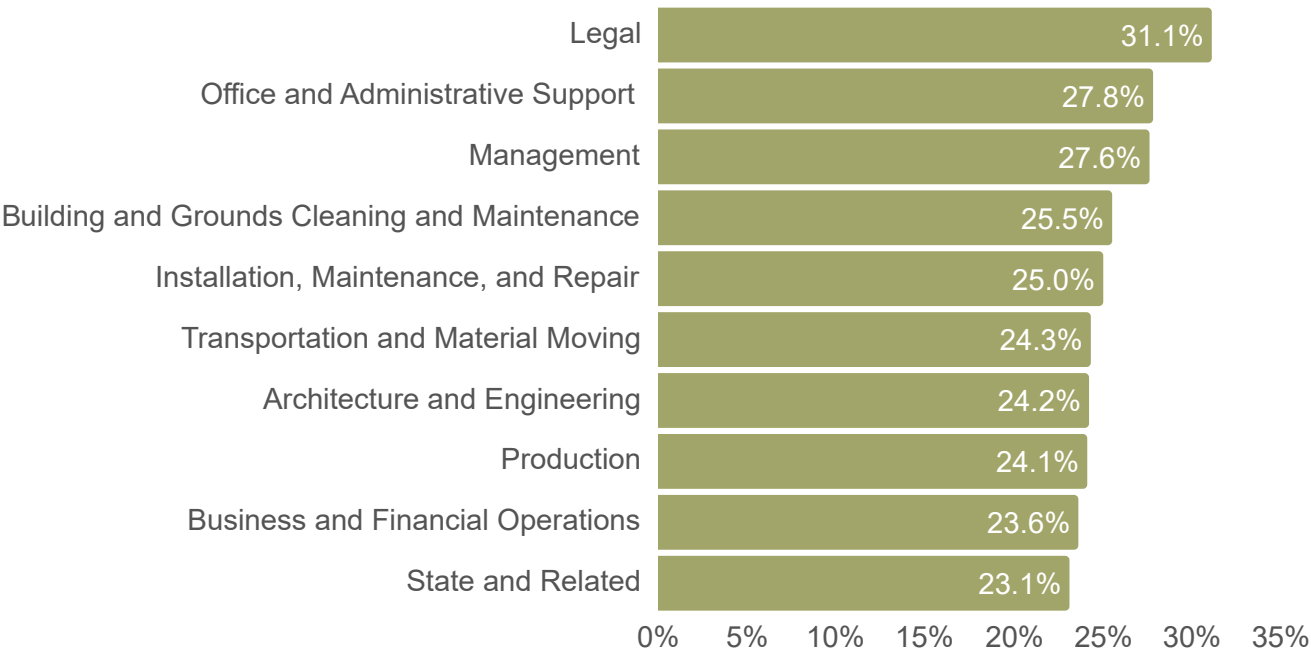
By occupation group

Many of West Michigan’s most critical roles are **aging faster than the regional average**, with the share of workers aged 55 and older frequently exceeding the 22.6% benchmark. This concentration signals a **growing risk of retirement-driven talent loss**, particularly in positions that rely on **deep institutional knowledge and highly specialized experience**.

At the same time, fewer workers are entering these roles at comparable rates, leaving **limited bench strength in several foundational industries**. As a result, many essential operational and leadership functions remain concentrated within a narrow and aging segment of the workforce.

The implication is clear: **without proactive succession planning and talent pipeline development, organizations risk disruptions to continuity, productivity, and long-term capability**.

Percentage of Workforce Aged 55+ by Occupation Group, West Michigan
2025



Retirement risk can be addressed through:



WEST MICHIGAN TRENDS

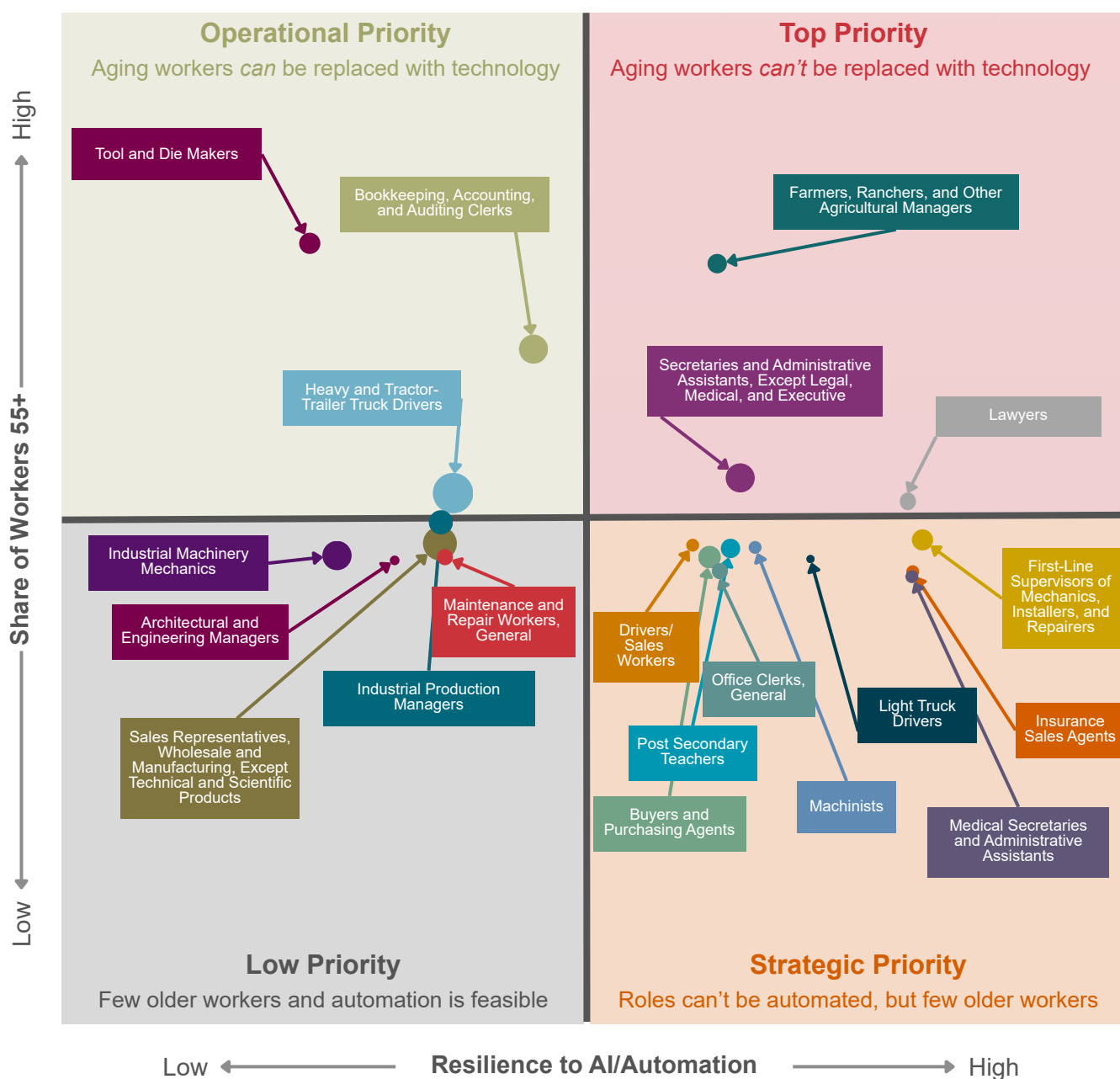
Succession planning

Priority matrix

West Michigan's workforce is confronting a dual challenge: a significant portion of **experienced workers nearing retirement** and the **increasing integration of AI and automation**. This intersection threatens to create substantial talent gaps, particularly in roles that are **both hard to automate and heavily reliant on seasoned expertise**.

Retirement Risk and Automation Resilience by Occupation

2024



KEY TAKEAWAYS

HIGH RISK OF AI DISRUPTION, ADOPTION UNEVEN

West Michigan's workforce faces significant exposure to automation and AI, particularly in roles centered on the routine and process-driven tasks that sustain regional operations. More than **46.8%** of jobs are at above-average risk of disruption as intelligent systems and automated workflows continue to advance, threatening the stability of many foundational administrative and support functions.

At the same time, AI-related skills appeared in **4.8%** of STEM job postings in 2025, positioning the region slightly above the Michigan state average. This suggests that while disruption risk is mounting, adoption remains measured — creating a strategic opportunity for employers to integrate these technologies into their workflows early to improve productivity and maintain West Michigan's long-term competitive edge.

What this Means for You

- ✓ Assess automation exposure in regional operations and manufacturing, implementing strategic workforce planning before technological disruption accelerates.
- ✓ Integrate digital literacy and AI tools into training programs to bridge the gap between frontline execution and high-level management.
- ✓ Prioritize durable skills like problem-solving and communication to complement AI workflows and ensure long-term workforce adaptability across West Michigan.

ENTRY POINTS ARE NARROWING

Currently, **21.2%** of today's ninth graders in West Michigan are on track to earn a credential within eight years — a rate that falls short of sustaining long-term workforce needs. While graduate volume remains strong, alignment between talent pathways and workforce demand is becoming more complex with the professional and technical demands driving the region's core industries.

As knowledge requirements rise and routine roles evolve, traditional entry points into the workforce are becoming less accessible. Without clearer pathways, early exposure, and stackable credentials, West Michigan risks constraining its future capacity even as demand for advanced specialized skills continues to accelerate.

What this Means for You

- ✓ Establish early exposure opportunities like internships and school partnerships to introduce students to high-demand regional career paths.
- ✓ Support alternative credential pathways, including stackable certifications that align with evolving industrial and professional standards.
- ✓ Position core regional roles as accessible and upwardly mobile, highlighting diverse growth opportunities across management, operations, and technical functions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

AGING WORKFORCE IN MISSION-CRITICAL ROLES

West Michigan's workforce faces a demographic imbalance, with **22.6%** of workers aged 55 and older. This expertise is concentrated in senior leadership and technical roles, while only **15.8%** of the workforce is under 25, signaling a limited pipeline of incoming talent to succeed current professionals.

This disparity increases succession risk as regional operations rely heavily on institutional memory. Without proactive leadership development and structured knowledge transfer, employers face potential capacity constraints as their most experienced experts transition toward retirement.

What this Means for You

- ✓ Prioritize mentorship to capture vital institutional knowledge before senior professionals retire.
- ✓ Develop leadership pathways to prepare younger talent for advanced roles and improve long-term retention.
- ✓ Modernize recruitment to better attract the under-25 demographic by highlighting stability and clear advancement opportunities.

LIMITED PIPELINES FOR SKILLED TALENT

While West Michigan produces **4 graduates for every 10 openings**, a growing gap between supply and demand continues to tighten the labor market. At the same time, demand for postsecondary credentials is rising across industries, increasing the importance of aligning pathways with evolving workforce requirements.

Strengthening alignment between graduation pathways and employer needs is essential to preserving regional economic potential. Continued collaboration across employers, education providers, and workforce partners will be critical to ensuring the region can meet accelerating demand for technical and professional talent.

What this Means for You

- ✓ Broaden recruitment by looking beyond traditional degree titles for candidates in adjacent fields with transferable skills, tapping into a more adaptable talent pool to fill specialized gaps.
- ✓ Strengthen educator partnerships to further align graduation pathways, ensuring local curricula continue evolving to address the needs of the regional workforce.
- ✓ Scale early outreach and applied learning programs to attract more students to high-growth career tracks, creating visible and viable pathways into the industry well before graduation.



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