As the U.S. economy opens up to more international trade, the popular press has tended to focus on the loss of American jobs associated with increasing imports. However, exports are also growing and are providing employment opportunities for U.S. workers—a fact that is often overlooked.

Commerce Department data show that U.S. exports have expanded much faster than the economy over the last decade. As exports have grown, so has the share of the labor force devoted to their production. However, while the value of international trade has climbed steadily over the last 10 years, the share of employment devoted to exports flattened out after 1991. The sharp increase prior to that time reflects the impact of the 1990 recession, when the demand for U.S. export goods rose and domestic demand weakened. The flattening out is the result of the recovery of domestic demand.

Now, more than 10% of all U.S. working hours are spent producing items that are consumed abroad. For whom are these goods and services produced? America's two largest trading partners, Mexico and Canada, together account for almost a third of our export-driven employment. Other Latin American countries, Japan, and Europe are responsible for most of the remaining jobs. However, this is changing. While employment during the 1986–94 period grew most rapidly for goods and services shipped to Mexico, the next-fastest growth was spurred by exports to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China.

a. The EC-12 countries comprise Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the U.K.