The labor market has undergone fundamental changes since the middle of the last century. The most significant of these has been the shift away from factory jobs and manual labor to jobs that require more skill and perhaps have better working conditions.

The occupational distribution of women in the workforce, shown with 1950’s ranking for the share of working females in each occupation, indicates that clerical and kindred is still the largest category. In 1950, roughly 25% of all female workers were employed in this occupation; in 1990 (the most recent census year for which data have been released), that share had increased to nearly one-third. The largest declines occurred among operatives, service workers in private households, and farm laborers. In 1950, about 21% of all working women were categorized as operatives; by 1990, this figure had fallen to only 9%. A striking gain has been observed for female professional and technical workers, an occupation that grew from about 10% of the female workforce in 1950 to more than 20% in 1990, and is now the second-largest employer of women.

Males show a similar pattern of occupational shifts. In 1950, operatives formed the largest occupational group, accounting for more than 20% of all men employed. By 1990, just over 15% of the male workforce were employed as operatives, a smaller share than craftsmen (20%) and professional and technical (16%).

For both males and females, the largest wage gains outside the farming sector occurred in three occupations: managers and officials, professional and technical, and sales workers.