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Decoding Workforce Readiness: A Skill Demand–Supply Study of Lucknow District

Introduction

When I worked on the Chikankari Workers Skill Enhancement and Awareness Program in Kakori, I witnessed firsthand how artisans, despite their intricate craftsmanship, were trapped in cycles of underpayment and exploitation. Local vendors bought their delicate work for meagre sums, only to resell it at much higher prices in urban and export markets. What struck me most was not just the unfair pay, but the lack of awareness and opportunity among the artisans themselves.

Demographic and Economic Overview

Lucknow district constitutes an estimated population of 5.93 million. The literacy rate stands at 77.29%, with male literacy at 82.56% and female literacy at 71.54%, leaving an 11-point gender gap. Urban literacy stands at 81.9%, compared to 67.8% in rural areas. This urban–rural disparity, along with gendered differences in access to education, highlights structural inequalities that directly shape the labor market.

The Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in Uttar Pradesh (used as a proxy for Lucknow) was 40.4% overall in 2023–24 (55.2% for men and 25.2% for women). Urban LFPRs in UP, including Lucknow, mirror this gender disparity, with women’s participation especially low due to cultural barriers, safety concerns, and lack of training access. The district’s per capita income was estimated at ₹1,15,455 in 2021–22, reflecting modest earnings compared to pressures of rapid urbanization and migration.

As Uttar Pradesh’s political and administrative capital, Lucknow combines a fast-growing gig economy with deep-rooted artisanal sectors such as Chikankaari and zardozi embroidery, marble inlay, and metalwork. Lucknow attracts a steady inflow of migrants, which diversifies its labour pool but also intensifies competition for limited formal jobs. Nearly one-third of Lucknow’s population are in-migrants (Census 2011), largely from nearby districts. Most are absorbed into low-wage informal jobs such as construction, gig services, petty trade, etc., expanding labour supply but intensifying competition for scarce formal work. This fuels wage suppression, underemployment of educated youth, and pressure on service sectors accompanied with limited access to structured training.

As a major destination for migrant workers and a district with low women’s workforce participation along with informal employment structures, Lucknow presents a clear case for targeted skill development that aligns traditional crafts and modern service jobs with market demand.



SECTORAL SKILL DEMAND-SUPPLY ASSESSMENT

The assessment of key economic sectors in Lucknow reveals a consistent pattern. While the district has a broad supply of workers, there are significant qualitative gaps between existing skills and industry requirements.

Chikankari & Zardozi (ODOP)

Lucknow's world-renowned Chikankari and zari-zardozi crafts continue to draw steady demand in domestic and export markets, supported by their Geographical Indication (GI) status and promotion under the One District One Product (ODOP) scheme. The local workforce possesses strong traditional skills; however, artisans often lack access to structured training in design upgradation, finishing and quality control, pricing, and e-commerce tools. As a result, their products are under-branded and fetch lower market value. The sector clearly requires skill development in modern design, digital marketing, and collective marketing strategies to ensure artisans capture a fair share of value. Tehreem Alam, a Chikankari artisan, says *"I earn barely ₹150–200 for a piece that sells for thousands. Vendors decide our wages; we have no say."*

Gig and Platform Services

The rise of delivery, ride-hailing, and home service platforms has expanded opportunities for youth and migrants in Lucknow. Yet these jobs demand digital literacy, app navigation, time management, customer service, and financial literacy areas where many entrants fall short. With a large pool of willing workers but variable skill readiness, targeted training in digital and customer-facing skills, along with safety and grievance protocols, is crucial to improve job quality and retention. Ajay Kumar (Age 34), a migrant construction worker, shared how he struggled to register on gig platforms and understand the digital payment features. His experience reflects the broader reality: while the gig economy offers quick entry, a lack of basic digital and financial skills keeps workers vulnerable, underpaid, and unable to maximize opportunities.

Retail and Hospitality

As an urban consumption hub, Lucknow's retail outlets, restaurants, and hotels are steady sources of employment for educated youth, particularly those with 10+2 or graduate qualifications. However, employers frequently report gaps in service etiquette, basic computer/PoS operations, inventory handling, and communication skills. Structured short courses in customer service, hygiene protocols, and spoken English/Hindi proficiency can help bridge this gap and align the youth workforce with industry expectations.

Healthcare Support

The growing number of diagnostic centers and clinics in the district has created demand for trained technicians, phlebotomists, and tele-health support staff. The current supply of certified professionals remains thin, leading to unmet demand in both public and private facilities. Short-term certification programs and internship-linked training pathways could significantly improve availability while offering graduates meaningful and stable employment.

PROGRAM MAPPING

<u>Program</u>	<u>What it offers</u>	<u>Existing Gaps</u>	<u>Opportunities</u>
UP Skill Development Mission (UPSDM)	NSQF-aligned short-term skilling; 30% women & 20% minority inclusion targets.	Courses often generic (tailoring, beautician); weak industry linkages → low placements. Training not aligned with gig, retail, healthcare demand.	Add gig readiness, hospitality, and healthcare modules. Build employer-tied skilling with malls, hospitals, and platforms for direct hiring.
One District One Product (ODOP – Chikankari & Zari– Zardozi)	Branding, marketing support, GI tag recognition; financial linkages for artisans.	Artisans remain informal, low- paid subcontractors. Gaps in design, QC, digital marketing. Women earn below minimum wage due to weak bargaining power.	Create design labs, QC certifications, e-commerce training. Form producer companies for scale. Link with design institutes to modernize craft appeal.
Platform/Gig Workforce Skilling (NITI Aayog)	National push to prepare workers for growing gig economy; focus on digital + financial literacy.	Workers lack smartphone literacy, financial planning, safety awareness. High attrition, unstable income.	Localize digital skills, financial literacy, customer etiquette, safety training. Partner with gig companies (Swiggy, Ola, Urban Company) for co-certified training pipelines.

BARRIERS TO SKILLING: INSIGHTS FROM LUCKNOW'S INFORMAL WORKFORCE



Ajay Kumar, who has worked in construction for over a decade, said he often hears about platforms like Urban Company or Rojgar apps but has never tried them. He explained that most workers in his area still rely on word of mouth or contractors for jobs, as they are unsure how to register or use these apps. Ajay's story highlights a deeper challenge — workers may be aware of new opportunities, but the pressure of daily survival leaves no room to experiment or invest in skilling. For him, sticking to contractors feels safer than navigating unfamiliar digital platforms, even if it means staying in low-paying, insecure work.



Buddhisagar, who has worked for over a decade as a maintenance helper in a residential apartment, handles everything from gardening and cleaning to minor electrical fixes, despite never receiving formal training. He still relies on trial and error and instructions from others.

His experience shows how workers like him carry entire apartment complexes on their shoulders yet remain invisible in the skill system. Without structured training, their work stays low-paid, insecure, and undervalued, despite being essential for urban living.

BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS: WHY THE GAPS PERSIST

Beyond structural barriers, the choices of Lucknow's youth and employers are shaped by behavioral dynamics that deeply influence workforce readiness. A prominent trend is the pursuit of immediate income through gig work. Many young people are drawn to jobs that offer daily or weekly cash flow, such as delivery services or ride-hailing, even if these roles lack stability or long-term growth. This short-term orientation often discourages investment in skill training, apprenticeships, or certifications that could build sustainable careers.

At the same time, low financial literacy and limited awareness of government skilling schemes mean that existing support systems remain underutilized. Several youths interviewed expressed skepticism about state-led training, citing lack of information or mistrust in placement outcomes. Employers echoed a similar mindset, focusing narrowly on immediate productivity rather than investing in structured training for their staff. Employers in crafts, retail, and gig platforms tend to value immediate productivity over skill development, preferring to hire workers who can "learn on the job", noted Ramraj Yadav, owner of a sweet shop. This reinforces informality and limits demand for certified skills. For women in particular, family expectations, safety concerns, and gender norms heavily restrict participation. Even when training opportunities exist, behavioral barriers, such as reluctance to work night shifts or skepticism about workplace safety, limit uptake.

An often-overlooked dimension is the strategic value of curiosity. Curiosity fuels personal growth and societal development by encouraging individuals to ask questions, explore alternatives, and innovate. Yet among Lucknow's youth, curiosity is frequently constrained by rigid schooling systems, cultural expectations, and limited exposure to diverse career pathways. Many young respondents reported choosing work simply because "everyone else in the area is doing it", reflecting conformity rather than exploration. This suppression of curiosity restricts not only individual potential but also the district's capacity for innovation and economic dynamism.

Rohit Upadhyay, a 29-year-old B. Tech graduate, now earns his livelihood as a delivery agent in Lucknow's gig economy. Despite years of formal education, he struggles to find stable employment that matches his qualifications. His story reflects a wider reality in the district: education often fails to translate into employability, pushing even qualified youth into low-skill, insecure gig work. Instead of building long-term careers, many young people like Rohit prioritize short-term earnings to meet immediate financial needs. This not only underutilizes the district's human capital but also reinforces a cycle where potential remains unrealized, and aspirations are compromised by circumstance.



WAY FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these behavioral barriers, simply expanding training programs will not close the skill gap but it will also require embedding curiosity-driven approaches into skilling programs. Any successful intervention in Lucknow must:

1. Combine skill-building with financial literacy and career counseling.
2. Improve trust in government schemes by showing clear placement outcomes.
3. Provide gender-sensitive, safe, and flexible training pathways for women.
4. Incentivize employers to value certification and continuous learning rather than short-term labour.
5. Project-based learning that encourages experimentation.
6. Exposure visits to industries beyond traditional crafts and gig work.
7. Peer-led workshops that normalize questioning and exploration.
8. Digital literacy labs that foster discovery through technology.

By shifting youth mindsets from survival-driven choices toward exploratory, growth-oriented learning, Lucknow can cultivate a workforce that is adaptable, entrepreneurial, and resilient, which are qualities essential for bridging skill gaps and sustaining inclusive development.

CONCLUSION

Lucknow stands at a crossroads, rich in talent but limited by informality, skill gaps and exclusion. Focused investments in demand-linked skilling, stronger market linkages and inclusion of women and migrants can unlock the city's full economic potential and create pathways to dignified and sustainable work.



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