

Abstract for NTU Presentation (July 4, 2018):

Who Demands High Skills? Variation in Skill Demands within Technical Occupations

Skill demands are a source of constant debate. Some analysts blame poor labor market outcomes--such as low wage growth--on workers' inability to meet high skill demands in an era of technical change. Others warn of looming technological unemployment as robots increasingly perform routine tasks, rendering large swaths of workers redundant. Still others push back against these narratives by pointing to the constant generation of new tasks and new or redefined occupations with attainable skill requirements. Despite the centrality of skill demands to these issues, little is known about patterns of variation in skill demands. Most available information on skill requirements consists of a single national rating for a given occupation. In this research, I employ results from three original, nationally representative surveys of employers to demonstrate substantial variation in skill requirements within occupations. I specifically explore what establishment-level factors predict high skill demands within three technical occupations: manufacturing production worker, IT helpdesk technician, and laboratory technologist. By analyzing within-occupation variation, we can gain insight into the importance of job design, management choice, and labor market context in the generation of high-skill demands. Such insight is important for setting labor market policy and anticipating the future impact of technology.