

2026

National 
Healthcareer
Association®

Industry Outlook



2026 Industry Outlook

How Allied Health is Transforming the Healthcare Workforce

Allied health professionals are reshaping how care is delivered across hospitals and health systems. Our 2026 Industry Outlook findings show these roles are expanding in scope, increasingly relied upon for clinical and operational continuity, and central to employers' strategies for hiring, retention, and upskilling.

Key takeaways from this year's Industry Outlook:

- **Growing responsibilities:** Across allied health roles, many professionals are taking on new clinical and support duties, with medical assistants reporting the largest increase in responsibilities.
- **Credentials matter:** Certification is strongly associated with higher performance and longer retention, reinforcing its role as a signal of job readiness.

- **Classroom-to-practice gap:** Employers report persistent gaps in applied clinical judgment and hands-on skills, and they are turning to apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training to bridge that divide.
- **Career pathways drive retention:** Laddering and internal promotion programs are widely viewed as effective tools to keep entry-level staff engaged and advancing.

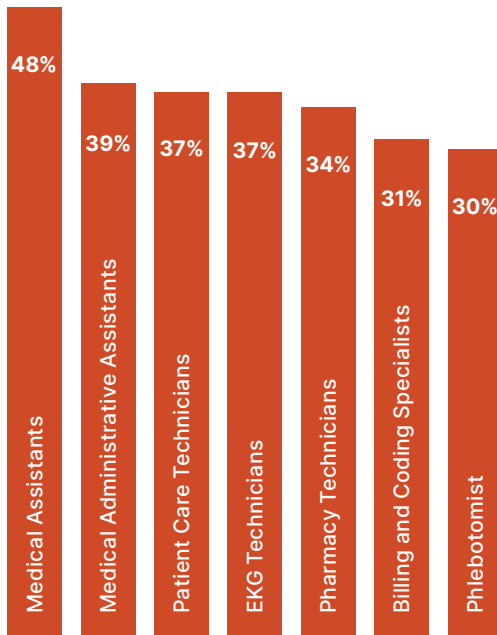
Read on to discover how certified allied health professionals strengthen workforce resilience and improve patient outcomes, and how employers can help build a more robust healthcare workforce.

Expanding Responsibilities Are Redefining Allied Health Roles

Allied health professionals sit at the center of today's healthcare ecosystem as its

resilient backbone. Our findings show that a confident, competent, and adaptable allied health workforce is not optional, and this becomes increasingly apparent when considering the growing scope of allied health professionals' responsibilities.

Percent of Respondents Seeing Year-Over-Year Responsibility Growth Per Role



In every allied health role, at least 30% of respondents indicated a growing scope of responsibility. Medical assistants (MAs) saw the highest reported growth, with 48% seeing new responsibilities placed on their team.

Nursing and physician staffing gaps are creating a growing reliance on support from allied health professionals. Allied health roles are increasingly tasked with delivering essential patient care and supporting nurses and physicians. These expanded responsibilities reflect broader workforce shortages and underscore how critical allied health professionals have become in maintaining care continuity.

Patient care technicians (PCTs), for example, are increasingly tasked with

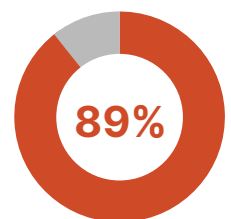
providing catheter care and obtaining EKG readings. Phlebotomists are being asked to prepare urine and other specimens more frequently, and EKG technicians have seen responsibility growth across the board. This trend is not limited to roles on the clinical floor. Pharmacy technicians, for example, are now far more likely to administer vaccines than in prior years, signaling a shift toward broader clinical engagement across professions.

When those in allied health roles see their responsibilities and skill requirements growing, it's an indicator that their presence as pillars of support within the healthcare ecosystem is more relevant than ever. It speaks to the growing staffing gaps that hospitals and health systems continue to face, and how allied health roles help fill those gaps. And with the U.S. senior population set to expand to 88 million by 2050, per the [National Institute of Health](#), those gaps will continue to grow if the demand for qualified health professions isn't met. As responsibilities grow, so does the need for assurance that individuals entering these roles are prepared to perform safely and effectively from day one.

Certification Signals Job Readiness and Quality Care

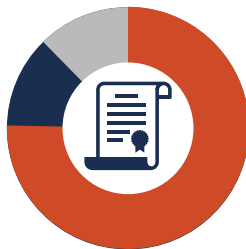
In an environment where allied health professionals are asked to do more, credentials remain one of the most trusted indicators of job readiness.

As an employer, would you hire a job candidate who has a nationally recognized certification over a candidate who does not, all other things being equal?



Does your institution increase pay when an employee earns professional certification?

74% Yes
12% No
13% Unsure



There's a clear link between allied health credentials and the value they provide professionals, especially in terms of employability, wage gains, and career advancement. Employers consistently point to certification as a reliable way to validate skills, competencies, and preparedness for practice. Certified allied health professionals are more likely to secure interviews, be hired, receive pay increases, and perform at a higher level than their non-certified peers.

According to our survey, 71% of employers find that certification correlates to higher performance.

More importantly, certification supports workforce stability. Employers associate certified professionals with stronger retention, with 66% of respondents saying their certified employees stay at the organization longer than a non-certified staff member. This reinforces the idea that credentials are not just a hiring filter, but a long-term investment in quality care,

retention, and organizational resilience. As roles expand and expectations rise, credentials provide employers with confidence and patients with better outcomes.

Employers and Educators Must Collaborate to Close the Classroom-to-Practice Gap

As healthcare roles grow more complex, the conversation around workforce readiness has begun to shift not away from the value of industry recognized credentials, but toward how learning is designed around them. Credentials remain a critical validation of foundational knowledge and signal readiness to enter the profession; however, employers increasingly expect new hires to apply that knowledge confidently and consistently in real world settings. The so called classroom-to-practice gap reflects this transition challenge, highlighting the need for instructional models that move beyond content exposure toward intentional application, feedback, and skill reinforcement. Rather than diminishing credential value, this evolution underscores their importance as the foundation upon which practice ready competence is built, reinforcing the role of high quality credentials within a broader, more connected learning ecosystem.



Do you believe a career laddering program for entry-level workers would increase employee retention rates?

Yes 91%

No 9%

Employers report that their clinical allied health roles see the most need for remediation in communication and clinical skills, patient interaction, and time management—skills that are hard to teach directly in the classroom, but see heavy use in a clinical setting interacting with patients. For administrative roles, these skills are time management, documentation, and communication skills.

Schools and employers must work together to ensure that new hires are ready for patient care and the skill demands of the clinical floor. Apprenticeship programs, internships, and externships are all options that help prepare learners for the challenges and unique situations they'll need to navigate on the job.

Of those utilizing apprenticeship programs, 79% of respondents said their program has been an effective tool for hiring quality talent. Now more than ever, collaboration is key in preparing learners for this increasingly complex healthcare landscape, and the responsibilities that come with it.

Career Pathways Are Critical for Retention and Workforce Stability

As competition for talent intensifies, retention has become just as critical as recruitment. Employers increasingly recognize that clear career pathways are essential to keeping allied health professionals engaged and advancing within the organization—91% of survey respondents felt that laddering programs

As a healthcare employer, what are your current professional certification requirements for each of the following professions?

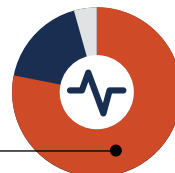
Billing & Coding Specialists

68% require certification
20% encourage certification



EKG Technicians

79% require certification
15% encourage certification



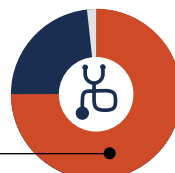
Medical Administrative Assistants

64% require certification
24% encourage certification



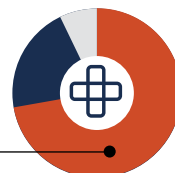
Clinical Medical Assistants

75% require certification
19% encourage certification



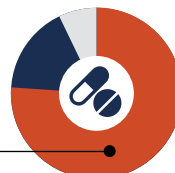
Patient Care Technicians

73% require certification
18% encourage certification



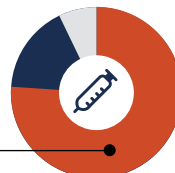
Pharmacy Technicians

77% require certification
14% encourage certification



Phlebotomy Technicians

77% require certification
14% encourage certification

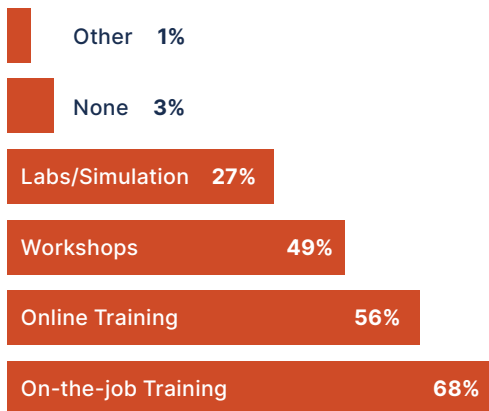


(n=195)

significantly increase retention rates among entry-level employees.

Employers overwhelmingly view internal training and promotion as one of the most effective ways to build a high-quality workforce. Currently, 64% of organizations are actively engaged in such training initiatives, with an additional 24% planning to implement them within the next 12 months. There has been a significant year-over-year increase in institutions offering career growth or laddering programs, reflecting a growing recognition of their importance in workforce development and retention.

Which of the following training methods does your institution use to develop employees' soft skills?
(Select all that apply).



Organizations that invest in career growth programs report stronger retention, higher job satisfaction, and a more resilient talent pipeline—outcomes that benefit both employees and patients alike.

A Shared Responsibility for the Future of Allied Health

Our research makes one theme unmistakably clear: as allied health professionals take on expanding responsibilities, the way we educate, credential, and develop them must grow in parallel. Schools, employers, and education partners all share responsibility for preparing learners to meet the demands of modern healthcare and must collaborate to make that happen.

From foundational training and apprenticeships to upskilling and career pathways, the future of patient care depends on coordinated action across the healthcare workforce ecosystem. By aligning education with employer needs and supporting lifelong skill development, the allied health workforce can continue to be a cornerstone of outstanding patient care—today and in the years ahead.





Billing & Coding Specialist

Billing and coding specialists main job responsibilities include:



13,800 new jobs



7% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025



71% Support billing and coding process



63% Gather and review essential patient information



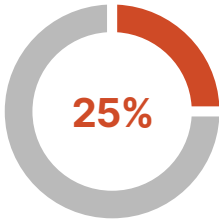
61% Submit claims for reimbursement



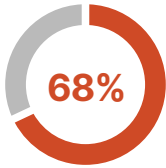
60% Prevent fraud and abuse by auditing



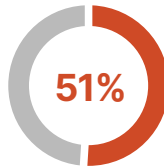
59% Assign codes for diagnoses and procedures



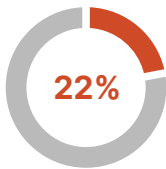
25% of employers say it's difficult to hire billing & coding specialists, the **3rd most difficult** role to hire for



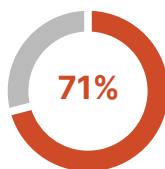
68% of employers report that newly certified billing & coding specialists are prepared to do their jobs (up 10% from 2024)



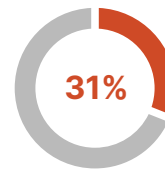
51% of employers offer career growth or laddering programs



22% of employers said it's difficult to find qualified billing & coding specialists this year compared to last



71% of employers say their employees are certified within their organization



31% of employers report that billing & coding specialists have more responsibility this year over last

Screening criteria for billing & coding specialist applications



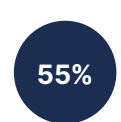
Knowledge of billing terms



Billing & coding specialist certification



Years of experience



Knowledge of processing requirements for major insurances



EKG Technician



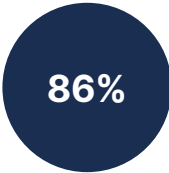
1,900 new jobs



3% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025

Screening criteria for EKG technician applications



EKG Technician Certification



Ability to interpret cardiac rhythms and identify life-threatening arrhythmias



Experience with cardiac event monitoring / Holter monitoring



Minimum years of experience

EKG technicians main job responsibilities



89% Set up & administer EKGs



75% Set up & administer stress tests



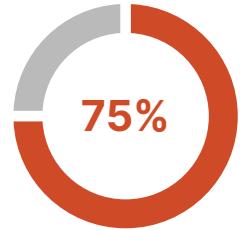
74% Prepare patients for monitoring



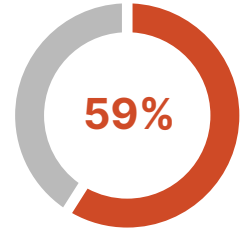
64% Perform telemetry testing



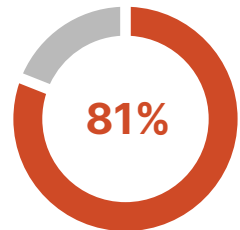
65% Review results to ensure completion & accuracy



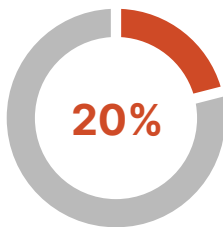
75% of employers report that newly certified EKG technicians are prepared to do their jobs



59% of employers offer career growth or ladder-ing programs



81% of employers report that their EKG technicians are certified



20% of employers said it's difficult to find qualified EKG technicians

Employers report the following skills are lacking in newly certified EKG technicians



Clinical Skills



EHR Skills



Communication



Medical Administrative Assistant



101,200 new jobs



12% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025*

Medical administrative assistant main job responsibilities



65% Schedule appointments



68% Operate office computer systems



71% Answer calls



68% Greet patients



62% Maintain files

Employers report the following skills are lacking in newly certified medical administrative assistants



Communication Skills



Time management



Clinical, technical, documentation skills

Screening criteria for medical administrative assistant applications



Medical admin assistant certification



Years of experience



Customer service experience



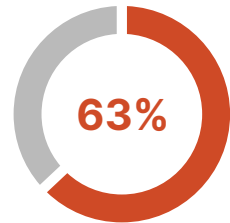
HS diploma or equivalent



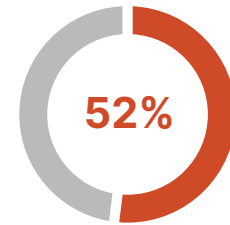
Proficient in MS office



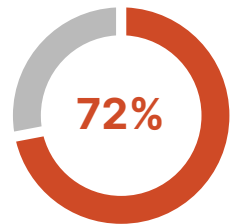
Excellent data entry skills



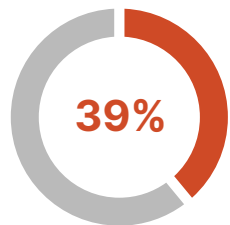
63% of employers report that newly certified medical administrative assistants are prepared to do their jobs



52% of employers offer career growth or ladder programs



72% of employers report that their medical administrative assistants are certified



39% of employers report that medical administrative assistants have more responsibility this year over last

*The BLS Occupational Handbook doesn't discern between Medical Administrative Assistants and Clinical Medical Assistants



Clinical Medical Assistant

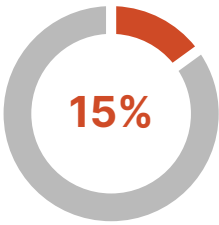


101,200 new jobs



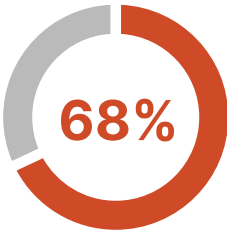
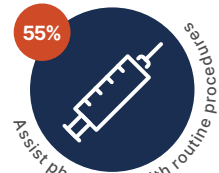
12% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025*

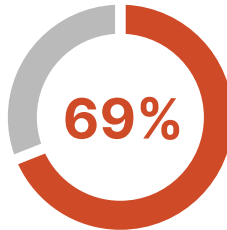


15% of employers said that it's difficult to find qualified medical assistants

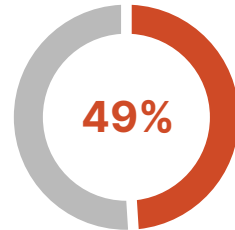
Employers report medical assistants are responsible for performing the following skills



68% of employers offer career growth or ladder-ing programs

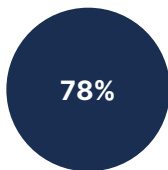


69% of employers that report newly certified medical assistants are pre-pared for their job duties



49% of employers say their medical assistants have more responsibilities than last year

Screening criteria for medical assistant applications



Medical assistant certification



Medical assistant training



Years of experience



Experience in administering injections/immunizations

*The BLS Occupational Handbook doesn't discern between Medical Administrative Assistants and Clinical Medical Assistants

n=145



Patient Care Technician / Assistant



34,400 new jobs



2% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025*

Patient care technicians main job responsibilities



72% Provide basic patient care



54% Monitor vital signs



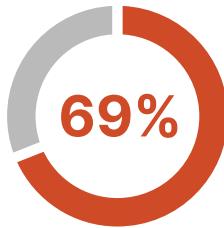
54% Perform safety checks



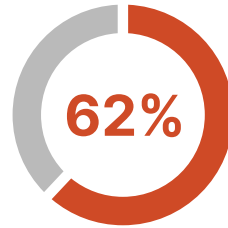
53% Perform basic point-of-care testing



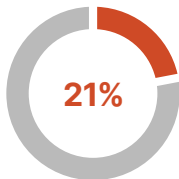
51% Acquire/administer patient care supplies



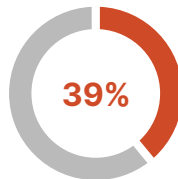
69% of employers offer career growth or ladder-ing programs



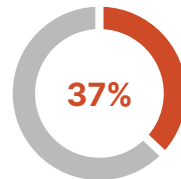
62% of employers that report newly certified patient care technicians are prepared for their job duties



21% of employers said it's difficult to find qualified patient care technicians



39% of employers report patient care technicians are lacking communication or pro-fessionalism skills



37% of employers believe that patient care technicians have more responsibility this year compared to last

Screening criteria for patient care technician applications



Patient care technician certification



CNA certification



HS diploma or equivalent



Years of experience

n=114

*This data refers to Nursing Assistants since the BLS Occupational Outlook Hand-book doesn't include information specific to Patient Care Technicians.



Pharmacy Technician

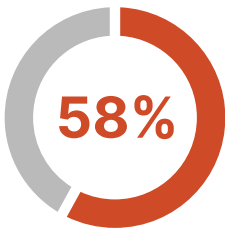


31,500 new jobs

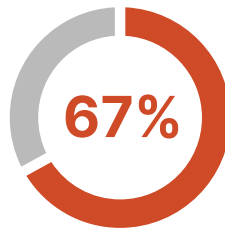


6% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025



58% of employers offer career growth or ladder-ing programs



67% of employers report newly certified pharmacy technicians are prepared for their job duties

Pharmacy technicians have a number of responsibilities, often requiring advanced skills



65% Management of inventory



62% Technician product verification



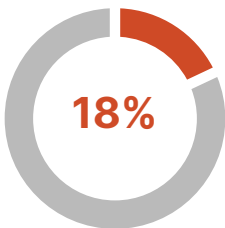
61% Prescription processing



60% Prescription dispensing

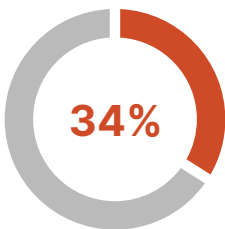
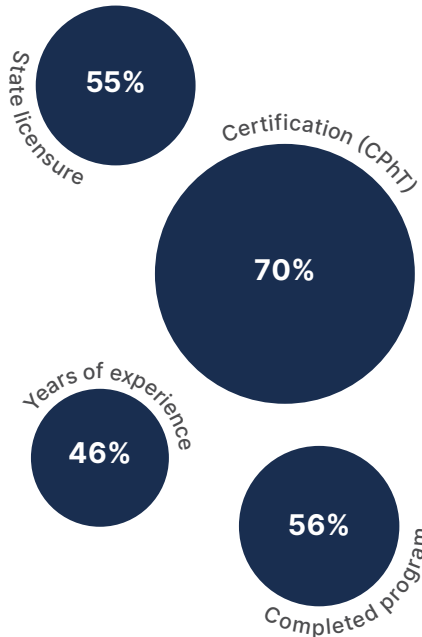


59% Calculation of medication amounts



18% of employers said it's difficult to find qualified pharmacy technicians

Screening criteria for pharmacy technician applications



34% of employers say their pharmacy technicians have more responsibilities than last year



Phlebotomy Technician



7,900 new jobs

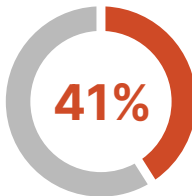


6% projected 10 year growth

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025

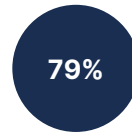


Employers report the average tenure for phlebotomy technicians at their organization



41% of employers offer career growth or laddering programs

Screening criteria for phlebotomy technician applications



Phlebotomy certification



Years of experience (up from 44% in 2024)



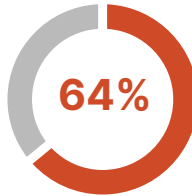
Completion of accredited phlebotomy training



HS diploma or equivalent



30% of employers say their phlebotomy technicians have more responsibilities than last year



64% of employers that report newly certified phlebotomy technicians are prepared for their job duties

Phlebotomy technician main job responsibilities



92% Draw blood from patients



74% Explain procedures to patients



74% Prepare blood specimens for testing



70% Prepare urine specimens for testing

Employers report the following skills new phlebotomy technicians lack



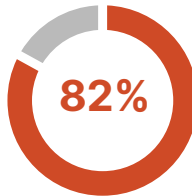
Communication Skills



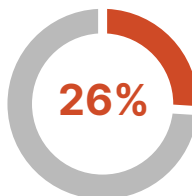
Time management



Clinical, technical, documentation skills



82% of employers report that their phlebotomy technicians are certified



26% of employers believe it's difficult to retain phlebotomy technicians

2026 Industry Outlook

Research Methodology

A third-party research firm conducted the research for the 2026 Industry Outlook. The survey was structured to assess the opinions of employers concerning the professional outlook for billing and coding specialists, EKG technicians, medical administrative assistants, medical assistants, patient care technicians, pharmacy technicians and phlebotomists. This survey was in the market from October 30, 2025, through November 5, 2025, with 195 to 216 responses completed.

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). Occupational Outlook Handbook.

National Healthcareer Association (2025). 2025 Industry Outlook.

About NHA & Industry Outlook

The National Healthcareer Association is passionately committed to developing, advancing, and advocating for the frontline healthcare worker by providing pathways to achievement. As the largest allied health certification agency in the United States, NHA has awarded over 1.5 million nationally recognized credentials.

For the past decade, NHA has collected insights and data from hundreds of employers of allied health professionals. We dig deeper to understand what they seek in candidates, what these professionals' daily work looks like, and what traits and skills make them most successful in their roles.

We're considering how employers validate and develop competencies across eight key allied health professions, how those roles may be evolving within their organization, and any challenges related to hiring and retention.

This survey was deployed to employers of 7 targeted professions—medical assistants, patient care technicians, pharmacy technicians, phlebotomy technicians, medical administrative assistants, billing and coding specialists, and EKG technicians—with the goal of retrieving at least 100 completed responses per profession.