WITHOUT LIMITS

A Shared Vision for the Future of Career Technical Education

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The world is changing at an increasingly rapid pace, with the future of work — or the work of the future — fully upon us. At the same time, our nation is facing a serious economic, workforce and health crisis that offers a critical and necessary opportunity to reflect on how we design and deliver Career Technical Education (CTE) so that it reaches its full impact and promise for each learner.

CTE must, as it has always done, continue to evolve to meet both the emerging and long-standing challenges our country faces. CTE has a central role in building an inclusive and equitable future that enables each learner to access the education and training they need to be successful in a meaningful career that offers financial security and self-sufficiency and ensures that industry can find the talent it needs to thrive. But this future will not occur without significant reflection, investment in the systems and programs that are supporting each learner successfully, and fundamental changes to the systems and structures that are limiting learner success.

Looking forward, we need a career preparation ecosystem that offers each learner access to and the means to succeed in any high-quality CTE program or experience that leads to success in their career of choice — regardless of where they live, their race or ethnicity, what education path they have taken so far, their circumstances or how they self-identify.

Building out such an ecosystem will require a coordinated set of federal, state and local systems, structures, policies and practices working in concert. It will also require the intentional removal of systemic barriers that perpetuate inequities and limit opportunity; geographic barriers that limit access; and institutional barriers that keep K-12, postsecondary, workforce development and economic development separate and siloed. Finally, it will require that CTE is fully valued as the critical and essential catalyst for this new ecosystem.

This vision is ambitious and will take bold action and leadership at all levels to reflect on, refine and even rebuild many of the systems and structures that are limiting learner success.

The five principles of this vision identify the systems and structures that need to be challenged and, in some cases, dismantled to achieve our vision. Supporting these principles is a set of foundational commitments — or non-negotiables — that must be in place, including a commitment to:

All dimensions of equity, including educational, racial, socioeconomic, gender and geographic, and meeting the unique needs of each individual learner;

Quality programs, instructors, instruction, work-based learning and credentials that are responsive to the needs of industry;

Meaningful public-private partnerships, with industry partners deeply invested and involved in the design, delivery and success of the CTE system;
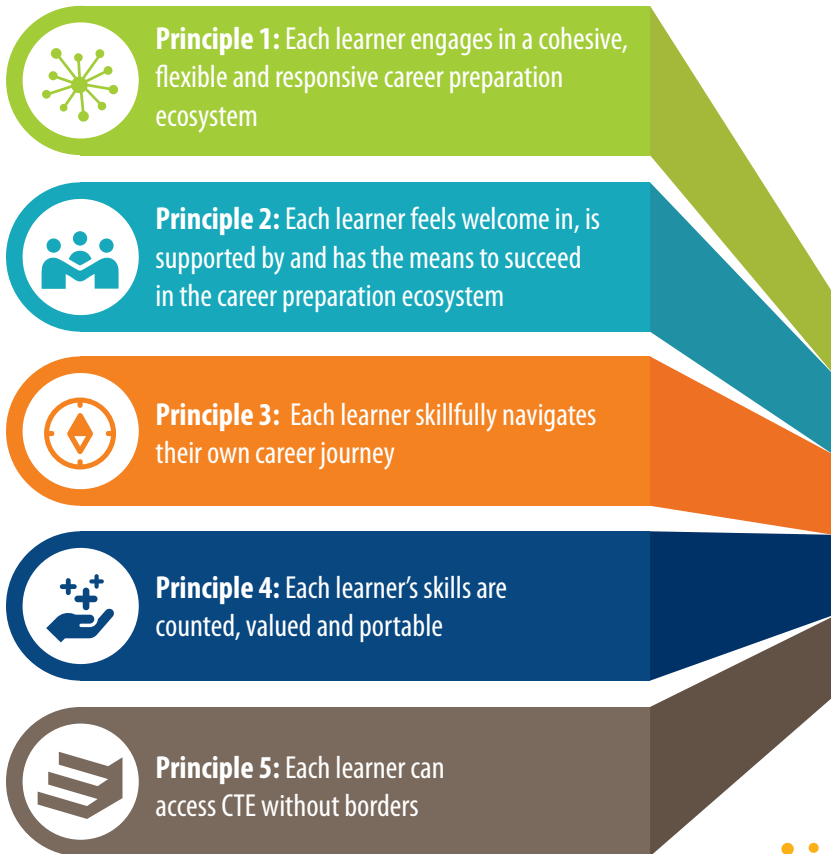
Actionable, transparent and trustworthy data; and

Continuous improvement and collaboration by leaders at all levels within our system.

A Vision for the Future of CTE

The five principles of this vision identify the systems and structures that need to be challenged and, in some cases, dismantled to achieve our vision:

Principle 1: Each learner engages in a cohesive, flexible and responsive career preparation ecosystem

Principle 2: Each learner feels welcome in, is supported by and has the means to succeed in the career preparation ecosystem

Principle 3: Each learner skillfully navigates their own career journey

Principle 4: Each learner's skills are counted, valued and portable

Principle 5: Each learner can access CTE without borders

Our vision:

CTE without limits

To achieve this vision, a set of foundational commitments must be in place, including a commitment to:

Equity

Quality Programs & Instructors

Meaningful Public-Private Partnerships

Actionable Data

Continuous Improvement & Collaboration

Each Learner Engages in a Cohesive, Flexible and Responsive Career Preparation Ecosystem

Learners need a career preparation ecosystem that recognizes and supports non-linear career progressions and is designed to allow all learners, not just those who opt into CTE programs, to get the skills they need, when they need them, without redundancy or limitations. The career preparation ecosystem must be nimble and offer flexible experiences, including high-quality and equitable CTE programs that are reflective of and responsive to learner and industry needs.

Building a career preparation ecosystem that serves every learner will require statewide, cross-agency commitment; deeper public-private partnerships; and supportive funding and accountability models that reinforce the ecosystem by valuing collaboration, equity and innovation. CTE sits at the nexus of K-12, postsecondary, adult education, workforce development and industry, making it uniquely positioned to serve as a catalyst for a learner-centered career preparation system.

To accomplish this, we must:

✔ **Establish shared, statewide goals for a cohesive career preparation ecosystem.**
States must adopt shared goals that recognize the need for more coherence across education and workforce systems to better and more fully meet the diverse needs of learners. States must align their policies, programs, federal plans, data, metrics and funding to reconcile the silos between delivery systems (education and workforce), learner levels (PreK-12, postsecondary and adult), academic and career-focused instruction, and credit and non-credit programs that create barriers for learners and lead to inefficiencies and redundancies. Each of these systems much understand their role in the new ecosystem and how they will engage with each other to provide best-in-class programs and supports for each learner.

✔ **Ensure that all CTE programs of study are flexible and responsive.**
Every CTE program of study and career pathway approved and funded by states — which begin as early as the middle grades and extend into adult upskilling and reskilling opportunities — should have well-articulated on- and off-ramps; be anchored by credentials of value; include opportunities for work-based learning; and align with high-skill, high-wage and in-demand careers.

At the same time, industry must not only be a beneficiary of this ecosystem but also serve as a key partner and contributor in its success. By aligning the career preparation ecosystem with talent pipeline strategies, states, districts, institutions and learners can access better information on the changing nature of work, the most in-demand competencies, and critical learner outcome and labor market data. Industry must partner with the public sector to build and maintain trusted systems for identifying and validating credentials of value, as well as for developing and implementing connected work-based learning systems (e.g., exploration through full apprenticeships).

✔ **Expand data and accountability models that value collaboration, equity and innovation.**
Accountability systems and structures must focus on the equitable outcomes we most want to see, including success in a meaningful, well-paying career for each learner and systems that value competencies and skills, not just seat time. Meeting this goal will require new state- and institution-level metrics that measure the full continuum of CTE, starting in the middle grades through high school and postsecondary and into adult CTE, with potential flexibility granted by the federal government. States and institutions can also create publicly reported equity indices to better design and evaluate interventions and supports for marginalized learners. These efforts will enable our systems to be better designed — and funded — to support learners wherever they are in their career journey and will paint a more comprehensive picture for policymakers, practitioners and learners.

✔ **Design equitable funding models that direct funding to where it is needed most.**
Our funding structures often perpetuate inequities at both the learner and system levels, with the gaps between well-resourced and under-resourced communities and institutions contributing to different opportunities for learners and limiting options for many. States and institutions should identify and leverage flexibilities within federal funding streams to better target and braid resources to achieve more equitable outcomes. New funding formulas should be incubated, piloted and scaled, moving us away from inequitable practices such as relying on property taxes and credit hours as the main drivers of funding at the secondary and postsecondary levels, respectively. State and federal policymakers also must reconsider limitations on financial aid for high-quality, short-term CTE programs and expand ability to benefit and other learner-focused funding to allow funding to best support each learner throughout their career progression.

2 Each Learner Feels Welcome in, Is Supported by and Has the Means to Succeed in the Career Preparation Ecosystem

It is well past time that our systems, leaders and practitioners identify and dismantle the institutional and systemic barriers that limit access, opportunity and outcomes for some learners. For far too long, a disproportionate number of learners of color, learners from low-income communities, learners with disabilities, English language learners, female learners and other historically marginalized populations have been tracked into terminal vocational programs that have denied their full potential and left them with limited opportunity.

Every aspect of our new career preparation ecosystem must be designed with an equity lens to ensure that it is fully flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of each learner throughout the CTE continuum. Meeting this goal will require in-depth work to identify the full scope of institutional barriers and systemic racism in policies and programs, learner-centric programs and interventions, and efforts to build trust with marginalized learners and communities to ensure that their voices and perspectives are brought to the forefront of decisions.

To accomplish this, we must:

✔ **Fully diagnose and understand the scope of institutional barriers and systemic racism.** States and institutions should conduct equity audits to assess how CTE is serving learners of color and other marginalized populations, such as learners with disabilities and learners from low-income communities. These audits must take into account policies and processes at the state or institution level that historically and systemically, intentionally or unintentionally, put barriers in place for certain learners due to racism or other forms of discrimination. These analyses must rely on both quantitative and qualitative data and culminate in actionable strategies for dismantling barriers to access and success. Such efforts must be coordinated with equity audits across the broader education and workforce systems. While CTE has its own equity challenges, the work to fully eliminate all barriers put before our learners is a shared responsibility that will require shared solutions.

✔ **Recruit, retain and support a diverse and culturally competent workforce.**
It is critical to have strong cultural competency within the career preparation ecosystem at the state, local and classroom levels and across the K-12, postsecondary and workforce development systems to ensure that CTE instructors, leaders and partners can understand, communicate with and effectively interact with learners across cultures and of different backgrounds.

States and institutions should commit to building recruitment strategies and talent pipeline programs that attract diverse CTE instructors, administrators and leaders who are demographically representative of the learners they teach and have strong industry expertise. We must also build the capacity of instructors and leaders through pre-service and in-service professional development that addresses trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive and globally competent teaching methods, inclusivity, and classroom-based and work-based management techniques. Industry partners providing work-based learning or mentorships should also receive supports and training to build their cultural competency as they interact with a diverse group of learners.

✔ **Design CTE programs and interventions on the margin while maintaining a commitment to quality.**
Interventions and services should be built to meet the needs of learners who have the most barriers to access and success. In particular, states and communities will need to meaningfully engage currently hidden populations (justice-connected youth and adults, learners experiencing homelessness, single parents, etc.) as they are often placed on the margins of the education and workforce systems. The end result of this human-centered design process will be CTE programs that are fully accessible to every learner. Throughout this process, state and local leaders must stay committed to the quality of CTE programs so they do not fall into the trap of offering marginalized learners watered-down or lower-quality programs and experiences as a means of expanding access.

✔ **Provide meaningful and ongoing mechanisms for elevating the learner voice.**
CTE programs and related experiences must be learner centric — designed with learners, not simply for learners — which can only truly occur if learners have direct and ongoing input into the design and delivery of CTE programs and experiences that lead to meaningful career opportunities. States and institutions should leverage existing opportunities to create ongoing, open spaces to engage learners, families and key community partners to share their unique experiences with the CTE system. These spaces could include the Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment process, advisory committees and local workforce planning, as well as new structures and processes. CTE leaders will need to partner with community organizations and other allies to build trust with learners and their families and be prepared to lead authentic — and potentially challenging — conversations that have clear opportunities to affect policies, programs and learner supports.

3 Each Learner Skillfully Navigates Their Own Career Journey

A key element of the career preparation ecosystem is a coordinated set of supports that enables each learner to navigate their career journey skillfully and successfully. At every stage of their careers, learners need access to information and individuals that help them ask the right questions, identify high-quality CTE programs, and access the services and supports for which they qualify.

Truly empowering learners will require a comprehensive, accessible, transparent and connected advisement system. This system must start by engaging young learners as they build occupational identities and span their lifetimes, providing consistent and coordinated support and guidance as they continue to gain skills and progress in their careers.

To accomplish this, we must:

✔ **Offer integrated PreK-20W advisement systems.**
States and institutions must align career advisement and navigational supports, such as individual career and academic plans at the K-12 level, guided pathways at the postsecondary level, and career services offered through one stops and other providers for adults seeking upskilling or reskilling opportunities. Such integrated systems must connect learners to meaningful experiential learning opportunities, such as work-based learning and Career Technical Student Organizations, which can build social capital and professional skills. They must also feed into early warning and proactive advisement systems, which exist within some postsecondary institutions but are not prevalent at the secondary level nor commonly offered to adult learners in shorter-term programs and must be supported at scale and expanded to include indicators related to CTE.

In addition, by connecting the dots between career advisement and wraparound supports, such as child care and housing and transportation subsidies, learners will be fully supported on their pathways to success. It is more important than ever that career advisement systems attend to social-emotional learning and reflect trauma-informed principles to truly support the whole learner.

✔ **Provide transparent and accessible cross-state data on CTE options and outcomes.**
Learners and families must have access to the CTE program outcomes data and labor market information they need to guide their decisions and make thoughtful choices. The data should demystify where and how learners can access CTE programs and experiences as well as support services in their communities and communities across the country. With the right data — easily accessible and presented in the right way — learners will be able to understand the value and outcomes of specific CTE programs, such as job placement and wages, and how those outcomes might differ based on a learner's race or ethnicity, gender, educational background or other demographics.

Federal agencies, states and institutions also must expand and improve upon labor market information systems, providing learners with more transparent, reliable and real-time information on career opportunities, earnings, and how their educational decisions will impact their access to support services.

✔ **Invest the necessary resources to support integrated advisement systems.**
Integrated and meaningful advisement systems and consumer-driven data will happen only if we invest in them. To integrate advisement across K-12, postsecondary and workforce development — and attend to each learner's academic needs, career navigation, social-emotional supports and wraparound services — will require investments of time, resources and people. We cannot support each learner without dedicated federal, state and local investments in counseling professionals, training for any and all individuals working directly with learners (including counselors, instructors and industry partners), data systems and the wraparound supports themselves. We must also build capacity around data literacy so that counselors, instructors and other leaders and practitioners can both understand and communicate the data to learners and other stakeholders.
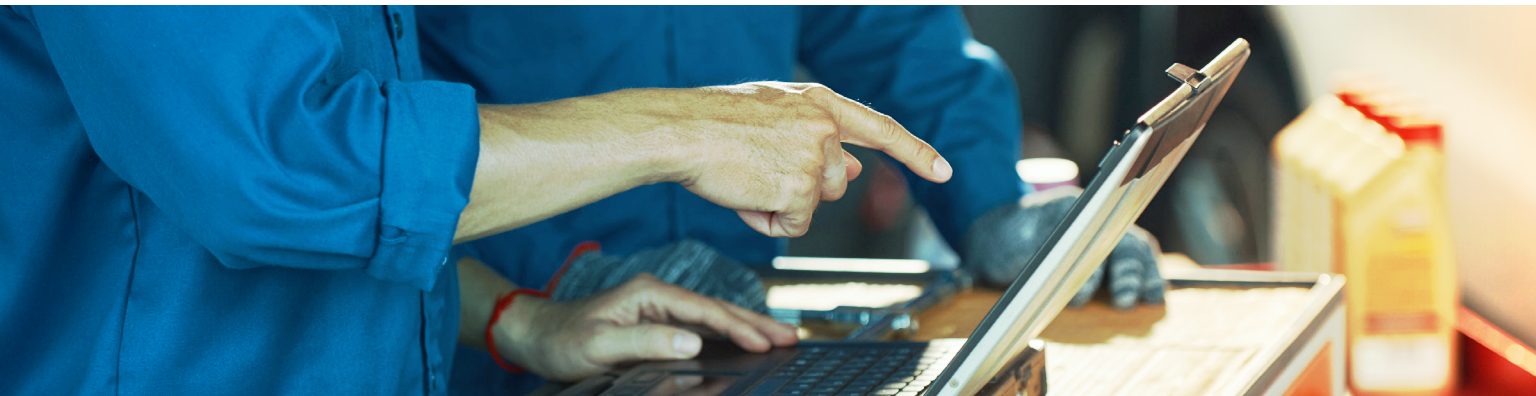
4 Each Learner's Skills Are Counted, Valued and Portable

Many learners enter education and training programs with experiences, skills and competencies that have value in the workplace. Yet, our education and workforce systems — and the funding, accreditation and accountability systems that undergird them — still overwhelmingly place a premium on seat time over skills and competencies.

Our career preparation ecosystem must enable and value upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning by recognizing and counting the skills and competencies learners gain throughout their lifetimes. For such a system to take root, we need industry to play its role in prioritizing skills and competencies in hiring practices. We also need trusted systems that translate all competencies into credit to ensure that learners have the greatest opportunity for success, wherever they live.

To accomplish this, we must:

✔ **Capture and value all learning that occurs, wherever and whenever it occurs.**
Learners gain skills in a variety of spaces — in the classroom, in work-based learning placements, in the military, through service and on the job. The federal government, states and institutions should continue to support, expand and scale competency-based policies and programs to capture skills attainment where and when it happens and give institutions more flexibility in the design and delivery of CTE programs that are not beholden to seat time requirements. Competency-based models, along with integrated education/training programs, can also remove silos

between academic and CTE instruction and capture knowledge and skills gained across content areas.

✔ **Build and leverage trusted systems to translate competencies and credentials into portable credit.**
States must expand, simplify and standardize early postsecondary credit, articulation and transfer policies and programs to further enable the full portability of credit within and across states. The current landscape of college in high school and postsecondary transfer policies and programs is overly complicated, often results in loss of credit, and does not consistently

support equitable access and success. One key lever that is available is the expansion and standardization of credit for prior learning policies and assessments, a proven strategy for increasing completion, keeping costs down and shortening time to degree, especially for adult, military, Black and Latinx learners. Currently credit for prior learning is very localized and does not afford learners consistent and equitable opportunities to earn credit within and across institutions.

States have a clear role to play in building out a broader policy infrastructure, embedding credentials of value within the credit for prior learning system, facilitating opportunities for collaboration and statewide articulation, and elevating existing opportunities for learners. States should also consider developing and scaling credit for prior learning policies and assessment at the K-12 level, which can mitigate challenges with learner mobility and support competency-based systems.

✔ **Expand skills-based hiring practices that value competencies.**
To help advance a career preparation ecosystem that focuses on skills and competencies — and does not just continue to default to value degrees, which can limit the diversity of a candidate pool — employers need to develop and implement skills-based hiring practices at scale. Under-valuing non-degree programs has a tremendous cost to employers and can leave behind workers with great experience but less traditional or no degrees.

To further empower learners, states and communities should provide each learner with a learning and employment record that captures the learner's accomplishments, aptitudes, skills and competencies. Such a tool will empower learners to better communicate about their skills and translate their experiences into competencies when seeking a job or additional education and training. In turn, human resource professionals need to ensure that the technology used to screen applications includes provisions for skills-based hiring and does not have any implicit bias built in.

PRINCIPLE 5

Each Learner Can Access CTE Without Borders

If we are to truly meet learners' needs across the country, we must remove geographic barriers that limit access and opportunities for learners, particularly those in rural communities. Learners are increasingly mobile and not place based, with more learning and work happening remotely across state lines.

Our policies and programs should enable, not limit, mobility and access. States must come together to develop and expand new models of collaboration; invest in cross-state, open access systems; and agree to common frameworks for defining and delivering CTE.

To accomplish this, we must:

✓ **Leverage a national framework for connecting education and the workforce.** There is great value in having a shared framework that supports cross-state collaboration, provides a common language across education and industry, and enables cross-state comparisons and sharing. The work to update the National Career Clusters® Framework is focused on providing structural alignment and a common language to bridge education and work and on empowering each learner to explore, decide on and prepare for dynamic and evolving careers. Its development and release can provide new opportunities to break down silos within and across systems and states in the years to come, just as the current Framework has provided a consistent federal data collection structure as well as a common way for states to organize, align and promote their CTE programs and experiences.

✓ **Develop inter-state compacts that support collaboration and remove barriers.** States should build on existing inter-state compact efforts, which can enable the flow of learners, data, instructors, credits and credentials across state lines to better reflect the global economy in which our learners and employers live. Such compacts can allow learners to seamlessly access in-person and virtual CTE programs and work-based learning experiences in any community or institution without needing to relocate.

Through such collaborations, states can jointly develop regional programs of study, as well as instructional tools such as open educational resources, to reduce redundancies and maximize capacity. By sharing data, policymakers, practitioners and learners can better understand CTE outcomes, especially when learners live and work in different states. Through reciprocity agreements, states can share instructors, technology and other key aspects of CTE delivery. States also must come together to develop cross-state frameworks that consistently translate skills and competencies into credit. These credits can then be transferable within and across schools, postsecondary institutions and states. Such inter-state compacts need to be supported by clearer and more consistent data collection and requirements at the federal level, as well as collaboration among regional accreditors.

✔ **Invest in research and development to ensure that virtual opportunities are quality, equitable and meaningful.**
In addition to policies and partnerships that support access to CTE programs and work-based learning experiences beyond a learner's community, the federal government, national organizations, states and institutions need to invest in research and development to build out the next generation of technology solutions, instructional design models, open educational resources and instructor supports to ensure that virtual experiences are quality and achieve more equitable access. This terrain is new for the CTE system and is ripe for innovation, if the policies are there to support them.

CALL TO ACTION
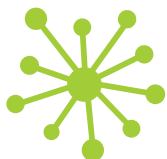
The vision described in this document is ambitious and forward looking. It puts equity at the center and recognizes that we need a CTE system that works for each learner, wherever they are in their career journey and whatever their background. Our systems and leaders must come together to push beyond the status quo and take collective, collaborative and bold action.

This vision is not just calling for updates to our CTE, education and workforce systems. Rather, it is calling for a more cohesive, flexible and responsive career preparation ecosystem, with CTE at its nexus, that draws on the capacity of each existing system; leverages these systems' greatest assets; and pushes for new models of collaboration, learner-centric design and delivery, funding and accountability that create the right incentives and supports.

We recognize that this work cannot happen overnight but will require a shared commitment and shared ownership among our leaders and practitioners at the national, state and local levels and across education, workforce development, industry and philanthropy. Only together — through persistence, resilience, bravery, boldness and commitment — can we realize the possibility and aspiration of a new career preparation ecosystem that provides each learner with limitless opportunity.

CTE WITHOUT LIMITS SUPPORTERS

Achieving the Dream

Advance CTE*

Alliance for Excellent Education

American School Counselor Association

American Youth Policy Forum

Association for Career and Technical Education*

Business Professionals of America

Center for Global Education at Asia Society

Center for Law & Social Policy

Center for Occupational Research and Development

Coalition for Career Development Center

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

College in High School Alliance

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

Council of Chief State School Officers*

Data Quality Campaign

DECA

Education Strategy Group

Family, Career and Community Leaders of America

Future Business Leaders of America-Phi Beta Lambda, Inc.

HOSA — Future Health Professionals

KnowledgeWorks

NAF

National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships

National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity

National Association of State Boards of Education*

National Association of State Directors of Adult Education

National Association of State Workforce Agencies*

National Career Pathways Network

National Council for Workforce Education

National FFA

National Skills Coalition*

Opportunity America

SkillsUSA

Southern Regional Education Board

State Higher Education Executive Officers Association*

Technology Student Association

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation*

Western Interstate Commission of Higher Education

*CTE Forward Summit co-convener

About Without Limits

Without Limits: A Shared Vision for the Future of Career Technical Education was developed with input from nearly 200 individuals, representing all stakeholders within the CTE system, through CTE Forward: A Summit on CTE's Impact & Promise, an event held in fall 2020. Without Limits was developed with the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Strada Education Network.
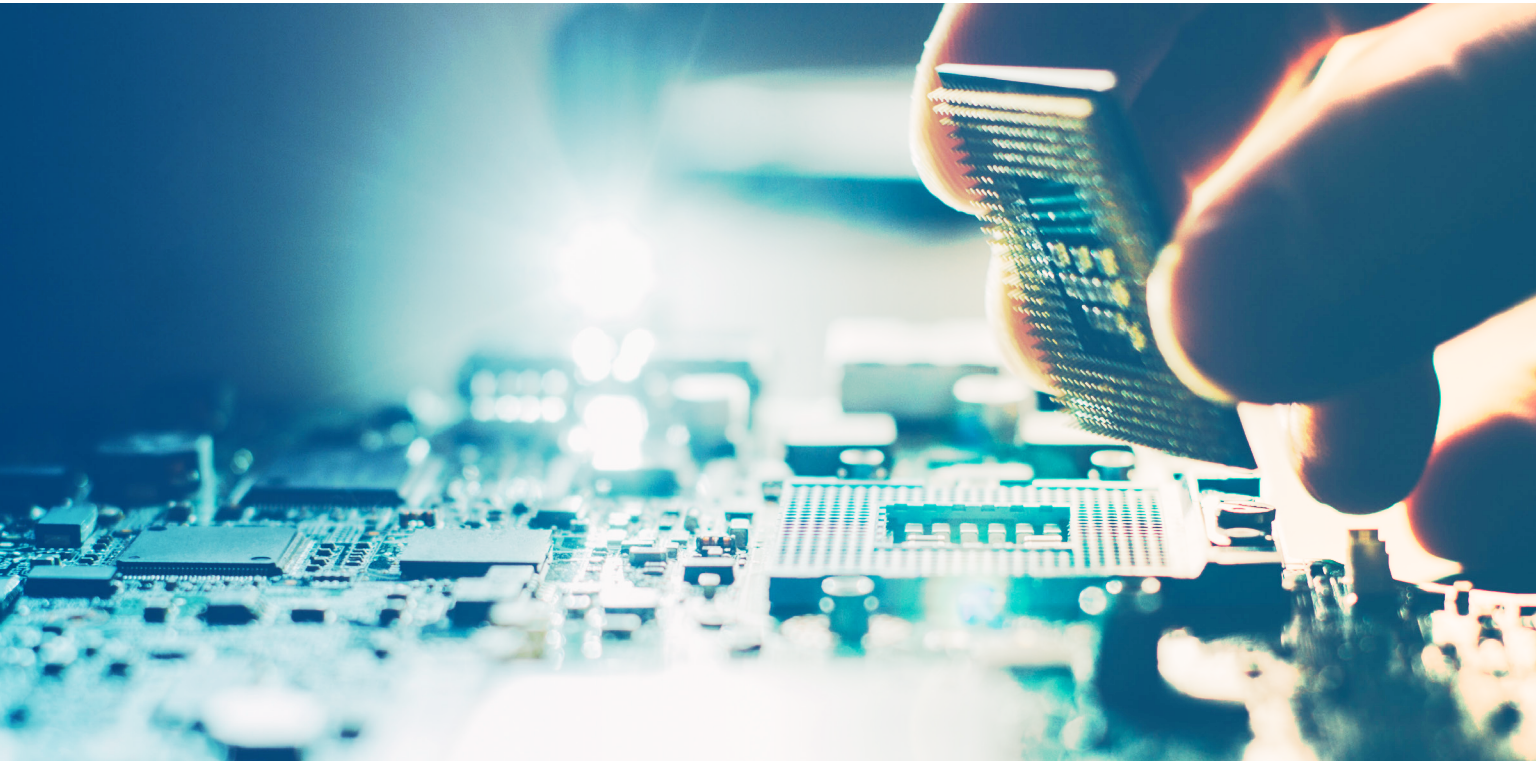
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