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STATE OF BLUE COLLAR
AMERICA
SATISFIED WITH WORK ★ SATISFIED WITH LIFE

It's time to rethink what we think we know
about blue collar work.

An Express Employment Professionals White Paper

ExpressPros.com



“There’s been a great deal of chatter about the future and frustrations of America’s blue collar workers. But our research shows that most blue collar workers feel good about themselves and their jobs. They’re proud of who they are and what they do, and our country is better for it.”

—Bill Stoller, CEO, Express Employment Professionals



A NATIONWIDE STUDY

In the summer of 2018, Express Employment Professionals commissioned a study of America’s blue collar workers. This study was conducted online by The Harris Poll and included 1,049 U.S. adults aged 18 or older who are full-time employed, part-time employed or self-employed in a job that requires manual labor in one of the following industries: construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, automotive services, maintenance, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting or utilities. The survey was conducted between July 9 and July 23, 2018. The results of the survey, which made headlines nationally when released, are discussed in greater detail throughout this paper.

—Results were weighted as needed by gender for age, education, race/ethnicity, region and household income.¹

BLUE COLLAR AMERICA

America makes many assumptions about its blue collar workers. And it turns out, many of them are wrong.

“Blue collar” means something different to just about everyone. For some, it conjures images of the careers of a past generation. For others, it’s synonymous with undesirable work or a political trope. Some blue collar workers do not even use the term to describe themselves.

There’s also been plenty of political analysis about the state of blue collar workers in recent years, with some arguing that their changing voting habits have driven surprising electoral outcomes.

Thanks to a poll commissioned by Express Employment Professionals in 2018, we finally have real insight into the lives and views of America’s blue collar workforce—from blue collar workers themselves.²

Conventional wisdom says they are disaffected, but the data says they are optimistic.

Conventional wisdom says they dislike their work, but the data says they find meaning in their jobs.

Conventional wisdom says they have no chance for some form of advancement, but the data says two thirds have seen pay increases in the past year.

The modern blue collar workforce is changing, and it’s time attitudes change with it.

DEFINING “BLUE COLLAR”

For purposes of this paper, the definition of a “blue collar worker” is the same as that used in the Express survey: a worker who is full-time employed, part-time employed or self-employed; performs work that requires manual labor; and works in one of the following industries: construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, automotive services, maintenance, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting or utilities.

Other news sources, reports and media accounts cited may rely on a slightly different definition or use the terms “working class” and “blue collar” interchangeably.



THE UNDERREPORTED STORY

NEW YORK POST

*Majority of Blue-Collar Workers
are Happy with Their Jobs: Poll*

Harvard
Business
Review

DEMOGRAPHICS

What So Many People Don't Get
About the U.S. Working Class

Examiner

High Career and Life Satisfaction Among
American Blue-Collar Workers: Poll

—Sources: *New York Post*³, *Harvard Business Review*⁴, *Washington Examiner*⁵

Until recently, the story of blue collar workers went something like this: left behind after the Great Recession, they have struggled to make ends meet or hold down a steady job. Not respected for the jobs they do, they were frustrated with the status quo and those who enable it. They are upset about the direction of the country and had little hope for the future.

That story is wrong.



“I think the biggest misconception is that blue collar jobs are mindless, low paying jobs. We have many skilled positions that go unfilled because there is a shortage of talented individuals wanting to enter the trades.”

—Luke Sodergren, *Express franchise owner, Wisconsin and Minnesota*



WORK THAT BRINGS SATISFACTION

Blue collar workers like what they do. The vast majority (86 percent) say they are satisfied with their jobs. One in three (33 percent) say they are “very satisfied.”

Their work gives them meaning, and a whopping 91 percent say they are “proud” of the work they do. Despite the conventional wisdom about blue collar work, 79 percent of blue collar workers say the people they know respect the work they do.

Nearly three in five blue collar workers (59 percent) say they like their jobs, and among those who consider themselves “skilled trade workers,” that number rises to 66 percent.

THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY ARE ABLE TO NAME SOMETHING POSITIVE ABOUT THEIR JOBS:



Those in skilled trades are more likely to report making a good living wage than those who consider themselves general labor workers, 60 percent to 48 percent.



“The biggest misconception about American workers today is that they are not engaged. They are highly engaged.”

—Janis Petrini, Express franchise owner, Grand Rapids, Michigan

SELF-EMPLOYED BLUE COLLAR WORKERS REALLY LIKE THEIR WORK.

99% OF SELF-EMPLOYED BLUE COLLAR WORKERS SAY THEY LOVE BEING THEIR OWN BOSS, ACCORDING TO THE SURVEY.



“Many of our skilled trades positions pay more than administrative jobs in my market.”

—Yvonne Rockwell, Express franchise owner, Santa Clarita, California



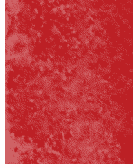
UNSURPRISINGLY, BLUE COLLAR WORKERS DO EXPRESS SOME CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR JOBS:

39%



Agree "it can be dangerous at times"

28%



Limited or no advancement opportunities

23%



Little to no flexibility in work hours

18%



Not making a good "living wage"

In spite of these concerns, blue collar workers are satisfied and like what they do.



"The biggest concern I hear is as they age, they may not be able to handle the physical requirements. However, if someone continues to learn and be an expert, their knowledge can overcome the lack of physical abilities. Then, they may teach others and become a resource based on knowledge and experience."

—Daniel Morgan, Express franchise owner, Birmingham, Alabama



CAREER PATHS

It is sometimes assumed that blue collar jobs are jobs of last resort. Express experts who interact with blue collar workers every day know that's not true.

As Terri Greeno, an Express franchise owner in Crystal Lake, Illinois, points out, many are naturally drawn to blue collar jobs. "Blue collar work being the last resort is a misguided assumption because many are wired to work with their hands, being gifted in spatial cognition and mechanically inclined," she said. "They can look at the materials and see in their minds eye how it flows and then do it physically."

Janis Petrini, a franchise owner in Grand Rapids, Michigan, notes that some blue collar workers are earning larger paychecks that "rival" those of some college graduates in white collar jobs.

"The wages that can be made by blue collar workers are sustainable wages, especially in the skilled trades area and compete well against professional wages," she said.



"Blue collar work being the last resort is a misguided assumption because many are wired to work with their hands, being gifted in spatial cognition and mechanically inclined. They can look at the materials and see in their minds eye how it flows and then do it physically. For many, 'hands on' work gives them the satisfaction of a job well done."

—Terri Greeno, Express franchise owner, Crystal Lake, Illinois

About one in six blue collar workers (16 percent) say their parents influenced their career path, and 28 percent say they are working in a field that they expected to pursue. Those numbers go up among skilled trade workers: 23 percent say their parents had an influence, and 37 percent are in a field they expected to pursue.

One in five blue collar workers say they got started in their line of work because it pays well. Only 13 percent say it was the "only job I could get."

Perhaps the most important statistic in dispelling the "last resort" assumption is this:

Nearly three-fourths of blue collar workers in the U.S. (74 percent) say there is a good career path in their line of work.

WORK WORTH RECOMMENDING

Another indication of how blue collar workers feel about their jobs is that the majority would recommend that young people follow in their footsteps.

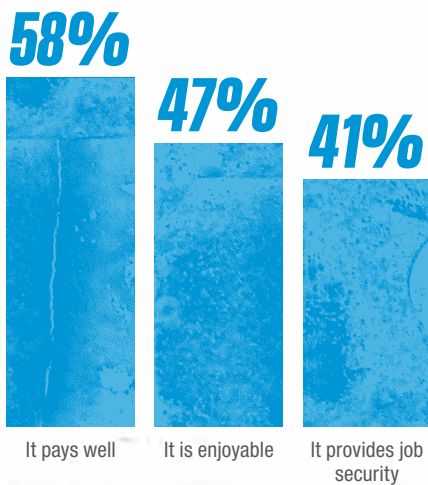
To be precise, 64 percent say they would be likely to encourage a family member or friend to pursue a career in their field of work. Sixty-five (65) percent say more young men should pursue careers in their field, and more than half of workers (52 percent) say the same about young women.



“In Nashville, due to supply and demand, the pay rates on blue collar positions are going up significantly. We see the most promise in machinists and robotic operators who can also provide basic maintenance.”

—Jason Patrick, Express franchise owner, Nashville, Tennessee

AND WHY DO THEY OFFER SUCH ADVICE? A NUMBER OF REASONS:



“The biggest myth about blue collar work today is that these are low wage jobs. The fact is that there are plenty of jobs available that pay between \$19 and \$30 an hour with two to 10 years of experience in skilled blue collar positions.”

—Reid Bates, Express franchise owner, Aberdeen, Olympia and Centralia, Washington



WHAT ABOUT COLLEGE?

It's not uncommon to hear the suggestion that blue collar work is for those who couldn't go to college. So, do blue collar workers wish they had gone to college? It's a very mixed answer.

Among those with a high school diploma or less, only 26 percent wish they had attended a four-year college, though a total of 55 percent wish they had gone to a four-year college, vocational school and/or community college.

Still, among those who did graduate college, almost half wish they had not. Forty-six (46) percent say they wish they had gone to vocational school, community college or gone straight into the workforce.

BLUE COLLAR EDUCATION VIEWS

HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR LESS: 26% WISH THEY HAD GONE TO A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE

COLLEGE GRADUATES: 46% WISH THEY HAD NOT GONE TO A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE

Here again, society's attitudes about the relationship between blue collar workers and college need to change. It's far more complicated than some suggest. One thing is clear, though: it's possible to have a well-paying blue collar job that does not require a four-year college degree.



BLUER COLLAR, ROSIER OUTLOOK

BLUE COLLAR WORKERS: THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT.

80% OF BLUE COLLAR WORKERS ARE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE.

34% ARE "VERY OPTIMISTIC."

Right Direction or Wrong Track?



51%
BLUE COLLAR WORKERS

40%
ALL AMERICANS

—Source: Harvard-Harris Poll⁷

More than half of blue collar workers believe the country is headed in the right direction. A Harvard-Harris Poll conducted in December of 2018 said that only 40 percent of all Americans felt the same way.⁶

Eighty (80) percent also agree that “the harder you work, the more successful you will be,” and 70 percent agree that “the American Dream is alive for people like me.”

Everyday Challenges

But life is not without its challenges. While 84 percent of blue collar workers say they can make ends meet, nearly half of workers (48 percent) say it is difficult to do so. One in 10 say it is “very difficult.” And the majority say they have less than \$5,000 saved for an emergency.

- 14% say they currently have no money saved in case of an emergency
- 48% say they have between \$1 and \$4,999 saved
- 23% say they have between \$5,000 and \$24,999 saved
- 11% say they have \$25,000 or more saved
- 4% declined to answer

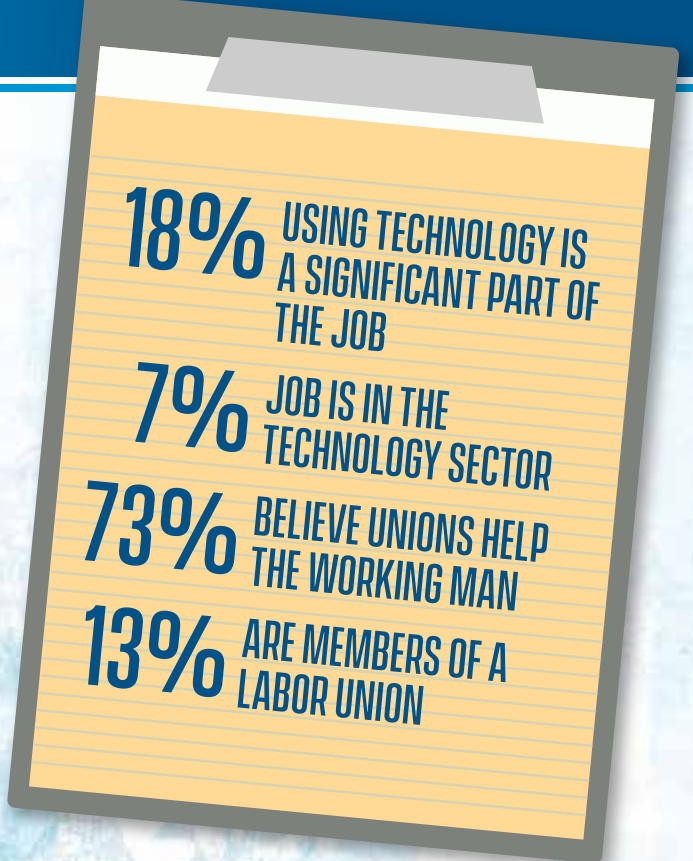
Still, these financial challenges have not diminished blue collar workers’ optimism or belief in the future.

WHO'S DOING WHAT?

On average, U.S. blue collar workers have been working for 22 years and been in their current job for approximately 10 years. Blue collar workers in the U.S. work about 41 hours per week, with 19 percent saying they work 50 or more hours each week.



AVERAGE
41 HOURS
PER WEEK



YEARS
AVG. CAREER LENGTH



YEARS
AVG. CURRENT JOB TENURE

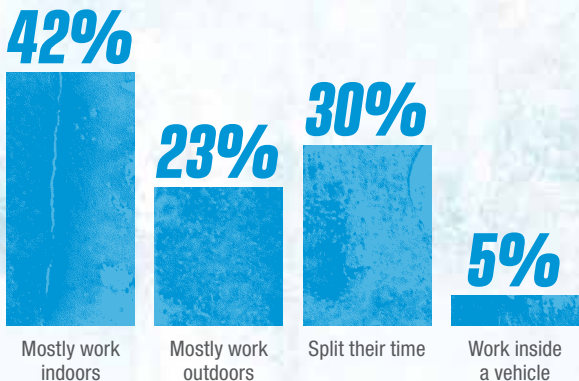


WORK IN SKILLED TRADES



WORK IN GENERAL LABOR

ON AVERAGE, BLUE COLLAR WORKERS IN THE U.S. WORK ABOUT 41 HOURS PER WEEK:



80% ARE PAID HOURLY AND SAY THEIR JOBS PROVIDE A GOOD LIVING TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT THEIR FAMILY



THE FUTURE OF BLUE COLLAR WORK

The past year has been good for blue collar workers. More than two-thirds (68 percent) received pay increases, and nearly half (45 percent) saw increased job responsibilities. Thirty-five (35) percent got a promotion.

RISING WAGES

68% RECEIVED A PAY INCREASE IN THE PAST YEAR.

ONE-QUARTER RECEIVED AN INCREASE OF 10% OR MORE.

Workers expect more good news is on the way with 55 percent saying they expect a pay increase in 2019.

Shortage of jobs or shortage of workers?

What about the longer term outlook? Though it's common to hear about blue collar jobs "disappearing," only 22 percent of blue collar workers worry about a decline in job opportunities.

Forty-three (43) percent believe the number of jobs in their field will stay the same over the next 10 years, while 35 percent expect the number to increase. Only 13 percent worry about losing their job in the near future.

Just 8 percent say there is a "high likelihood of being replaced by automation"—despite the coverage in popular media about the rise of workplace robots. Workplaces are indeed becoming increasingly automated, but blue collars workers, for their part, are not particularly worried about being replaced altogether.

A recent study from the Center for Global Development has found that increased automation is unlikely to lead to "mass unemployment," though the study's authors do warn about the possibility of "wage stagnation" at some point in the future.⁸

Dr. Hayaatun Sillem, chief executive of the Royal Academy of Engineering in the UK, argues, "People should look at the ongoing transformation from a prism of not how many jobs will go, but rather at the changing nature and scope of roles and tasks. We should be optimistic that there would be many new jobs created partly through the fact that technology would enable us to do things we could not previously do."⁹

Blue collar workers who have access to training and retraining, in other words, are likely to be able to adapt to a changing workforce.



“With the highly automated world we live in that will continue to grow, we need a lot of skilled trades and advanced manufacturing people. We make things in the US. We need people to help us to continue to do that.”

—Janis Petrini, Express franchise owner, Grand Rapids, Michigan

In the current economy, the more immediate concern is not a loss of jobs but a shortage of workers. Blue collar workers are in higher demand, and companies are competing over them.¹⁰ Baby Boomer retirements should only increase the demand.

That demand, of course, could wane with time—especially if businesses are forced to adapt to working without blue collar employees due to a lack of job seekers. But for now, it’s good to be blue collar.

Retirement Concerns

None of this is saying that blue collar workers will not face challenges down the road. If retirement ages rise, blue collar workers could feel harsher consequences than white collar workers. Because blue collar jobs require more physical labor, blue collar workers may not be able to delay retirement. As such, they may struggle to transition easily from work to retirement with “full benefits.”¹¹

Already, blue collar workers are concerned about retirement and receiving Social Security. Nearly three in four workers (73 percent) say they are worried about saving enough for their retirement, and more than half of workers (53 percent) agree that it’s “more likely that Martians will land on earth than I’ll collect Social Security.”



“The robust economy has resulted in a robust number of jobs, which then makes it much more competitive to keep employees.”

—Bernie Inbody, Express franchise owner, Omaha, Nebraska



“All the businesses in my area need people, and it’s very difficult to find them. Even if it’s for entry-level, no experience, it’s still hard to find people who go to work every single day, are on time, and produce.”

—Patricia Callihan-Bowman, Express franchise owner, Salem, Oregon

TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

Although nearly three in five workers (58 percent) agree having a blue collar job is respected more now than it was 10 years ago, 58 percent also say that society generally looks down on blue collar workers. Almost half, 48 percent, say that at times they feel like “a second class citizen” because of the type of work they do.

Blue collar workers are satisfied with their jobs, however, and the vast majority say the people they know respect their work. So this indicates that blue collar workers are more likely to be displeased with society’s view of the work—not the work itself.

It’s clearly time for Americans to rethink views on blue collar work and the people that do it. It’s not just about better understanding each other. It’s important for the strength of our economy. Blue collar jobs are some of the most in-demand, unfilled positions right now. Economic growth will depend on the country’s ability to fill those jobs, which in turn could depend on whether people view them as good opportunities.

If society perpetuates negative attitudes about blue collar work, people of all generations will be less likely to pursue those jobs. That would mean essential services could be harder to come by as jobs go unfilled. It could also mean that young people will miss out on good job opportunities and instead take on significant debt on the assumption that a white collar job requiring a college degree is only the way forward.

In other words, take it from blue collar workers themselves: **there are good blue collar jobs that provide a satisfying career and life—and reason for optimism in the future.**



ABOUT EXPRESS EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS

Express Employment Professionals puts people to work. It generated \$3.5 billion in sales and employed more than 566,000 people in 2018. Its long-term goal is to put a million people to work annually. For more information, visit ExpressPros.com.

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