

An Express Employment Professionals White Paper

- October 2022 -



"It is often assumed that people who aren't working can't find an open job. But in an economy where there are far more available jobs than people counted as unemployed, we know the situation is far more complicated. There are barriers standing between jobs and those who want to work. All of us need to understand these barriers so we can eliminate or overcome them as a society."

Bill Stoller, Chairman and CEO,
 Express Employment International



Blocking the Career Path

People Want to Work, But Something Is Standing in the Way

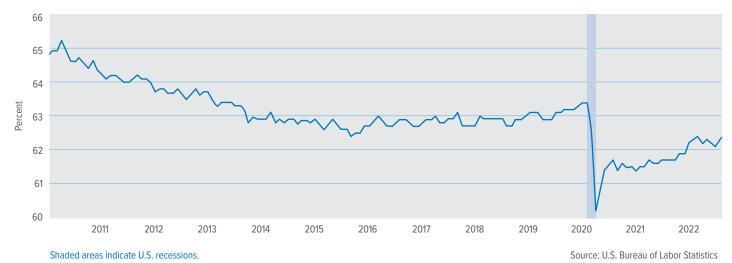
After spiking dramatically at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate in America has steadily declined since mid-2020. As of August 2022, unemployment had fallen to 3.7%—nearly back to where it was in February 2020¹—and job openings have skyrocketed while employers struggle to find workers to fill them.

While this low number is usually an encouraging sign for the economy, it can also be unintentionally deceptive. When the unemployment rate is calculated, people are only considered "unemployed" if they are actively looking for work. Those who have given up on finding a job or are not looking for work are no longer considered part of the labor force—and therefore not counted among the unemployed.

The labor force participation rate is a better metric for assessing the health of the labor market and the size of the active workforce. The labor force participation rate was 62.4% in August, whereas in February 2020, pre-pandemic, the labor force participation stood at $63.4\%^2$.

So, what is keeping people from rejoining the workforce?

Figure 1: Labor Force Participation Rate, 2010 – Present³



Adding the 6 million Americans who are officially counted as "unemployed" to the 5.6 million Americans who say they would like to work but are not "in the labor force" because they are not actively looking for work, there are 11.6 million Americans who want a job. With 11.2 million jobs open today, something, or a multitude of factors, is clearly standing in their way. Jobs are not in short supply, and companies desperately need people to fill them.



Figure 2: Job Openings in Selected Industries⁶

	July 2021	July 2022
Manufacturing	943,000	834,000
Professional and Business Services	1,935,000	2,089,000
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	1,897,000	1,824,000
Leisure and Hospitality	1,602,000	1,517,000
Construction	337,000	375,000
Education and Health Services	1,896,000	2,176,000

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics



The

10 BARRIERS

Drawing from the real-life experience of Express Employment Professionals franchise owners and the companies they serve, as well as exclusive survey data prepared by The Harris Poll for Express and recent economic data, Express has identified 10 common barriers to employment in the modern economy:

Child Care

Transportation and Geography

Elder Care

Health Issues and Concerns

Unpredictable Business Needs

Communication Issues

4 Job Training and Skills

Workplace Culture Expectations

- Work History and Criminal History
- Wage Expectations



1. Child Care

The COVID-19 pandemic upended child care in America and continues to disrupt child care facility operations, with many child care facilities closing their doors altogether and child care employees not returning to work. This leaves working parents under greater strain than ever before.

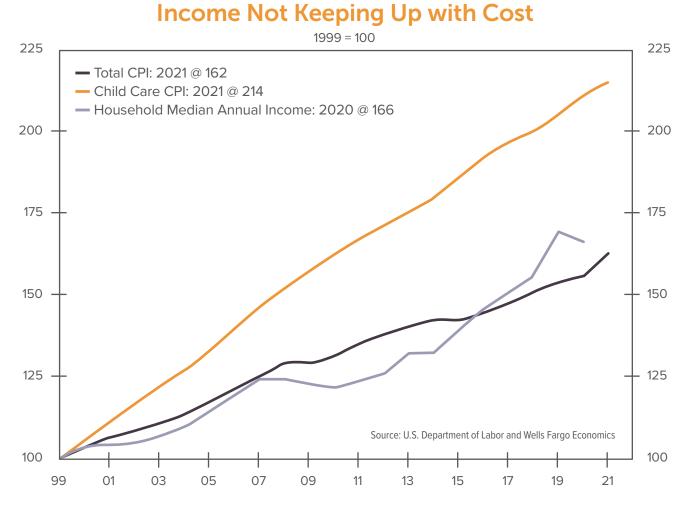
Paying for child care has long been a struggle for many; child care costs have risen faster than wages over the past two decades. But now, just finding a consistently open facility with availability can feel impossible.



"By far, the issue that continues to break down and get worse over time is child care options."

- Reggie Kaji, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Michigan

Figure 3: Rapid Rise of Child Care Costs⁸



By comparing the total Consumer Price Index (CPI), the child care CPI, and household median annual income, a Wells Fargo analysis demonstrates how child care costs have risen far faster than other costs, as well as household income.

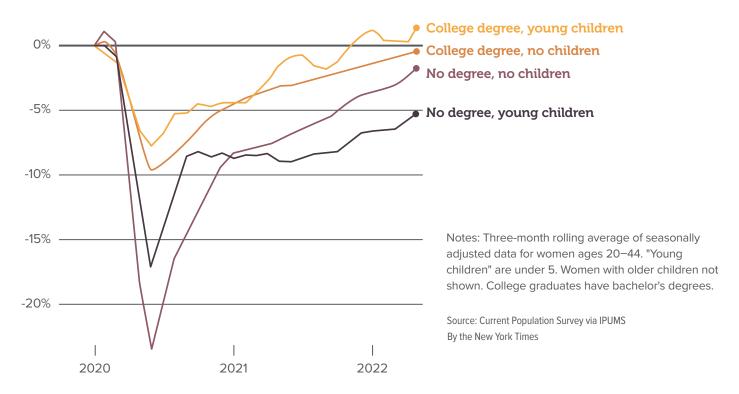
The New York Times

July 12, 2022

"Care workers have left the industry in large numbers amid the pandemic, shrinking the number of nursery and nursing home employees by hundreds of thousands. At the same time, coronavirus outbreaks have led to intermittent school shutdowns, which, in turn, have made care demands less predictable and increased the need for reliable backup options."

This appears to place the greatest burden on unmarried mothers without college degrees. They have returned to work at lower rates than others.¹⁰

Figure 4: Change in women's employment rate since Jan. 202011



"There is no way that we can afford \$1,500 a month for child care on our full-time salaries. We would go into debt just so that I could work full time."

Christy Charny, 32, told a New York Times reporter.¹²

Child Care Employees Feb. 2020: 1,054,200

Child Care Employees July 2022: 965,900

Difference: 88,300

A Wells Fargo analysis finds that the decrease in available child care "leaves about 460,000 families needing to find alternative care arrangements, equivalent to just over half the drop in the labor force since COVID." ¹³

The problem extends beyond child care facilities. Schools also face staffing and operating challenges of their own. During the 2021–2022 school year, widespread reports of bus driver shortages presented a similar problem—many parents had to make difficult choices about how to get their children to and from school while still showing up for work.¹⁴ At the start of the 2022–2023 school year, many school districts were reporting teacher shortages.¹⁵



"Child care availability is the number one barrier impacting families in our area, and the cost of child care is close behind. For some individuals, they either pay more for child care than they make, or they pay all that they make. Additionally, for many, there is a great barrier to child care access because so many facilities have closed over the past few years due to the pandemic."

Stacey Snodgrass, Express general manager,
 Bellingham, Washington

A survey from The Harris Poll of businesses commissioned by Express found that the situation has become severe enough that many companies are trying to help working parents cover these expenses. Some (22%) have offered additional incentives to parents, such as a daycare stipend, and some have increased the amount of employee parental leave (20%). In Utah, the state government announced "a one-time \$2,000 bonus for eligible child care employees across the state."

Until child care facilities return to their previous capacity levels, many parents will be kept out of the workforce—unless employers or others step in to fill the gap.

There's a longer-term risk here, too. If parents continue to have a difficult time finding or affording child care, younger Americans may be more likely to choose not to have children, slowing population growth and, over time, further exacerbating the worker shortage.

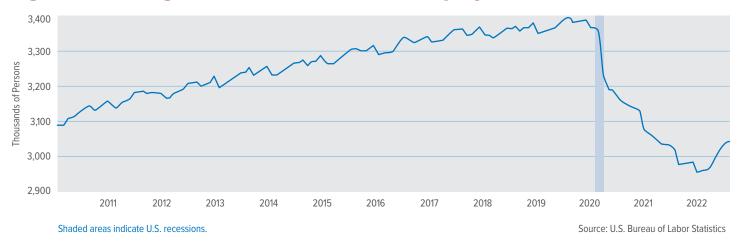




2. Elder Care

Between January 2020 and July 2022, 400,000 elder care professionals left their jobs at nursing homes and assisted living facilities. This puts an incredible strain on facilities' ability to provide reliable and quality care, as well as their ability to take in new patients and residents amid rising demand due to the aging population. But with staff experiencing pandemic exhaustion and expressing concerns about pay and advancement opportunities, it is difficult to both retain employees and recruit new ones.¹⁸

Figure 5: Nursing Home and Assisted Care Employees, 2010—Present¹⁹



The shortage of elder care professionals is especially stark within home health care, as that industry is considered to be one of the fastest growing.²⁰

All of this forces many working-age adults to choose between caring for a parent or loved one or going to work. If they can afford care, it may not be available; and if care is available, they may not be able to afford it. Medicare and most private insurance plans are not designed to cover long-term care, so families who neither qualify for Medicaid, nor can afford large medical bills, have few options but to provide that care themselves.²¹

An estimated 53 million Americans provide unpaid care for family members and friends; 41.8 million are caring for people 50 or older. And 36% have a net household income of less than \$50,000.22

To be sure, the pandemic exacerbated this issue, but it didn't create it. Elder care was already a challenge—a barrier—years ago, as Express explained in a 2018 white paper.²³





"Caregiving for a parent or elderly family member is the main reason many of our associates have decided to drop out of the workforce. The increased cost of elder care, and the limited availability of elder care facilities, has pushed many to the point of weighing whether it's more cost effective for them to stay home and care for their loved one or drop down to part time in order to care for their family. It's a difficult decision many households are having to make."

- Mike Brady, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Florida

"Elder care is something a lot of people, including myself, are facing. That is a difficult thing to navigate, especially if you are having to take your loved one to doctor's appointments on top of ensuring they are safe during the day. Regardless of age, when you're caring for someone, there is always concern about if they are safe when the caregiver is away at work."



- Stacey Snodgrass, Express general manager, Bellingham, Washington



3. Unpredictable Business Needs



Statistics show that jobs have been abundant in 2021 and 2022. But that doesn't capture the full economic picture—or the unique situation of individual companies. Businesses have been grappling with a host of issues that have created more unpredictability than any other period in recent memory.

Think about some of the questions that businesses are facing:

- Will we have to cancel orders if supplies don't arrive due to shipping delays?
- How will volatile energy prices affect our bottom line?
- How will port backlogs affect us?
- What does the local housing market mean for our ability to attract employees?
- Is Congress going to raise taxes on my business?
- Will we be able to invest in the equipment needed to expand our business? Will that equipment even be available due to the electronic chip shortage?
- Will inflation continue rising and eating into our profit margins?
- What does the threat of war overseas mean for our supply chains?

With questions like these looming, a business's outlook can change by the day. A business that is eager to hire many new employees one day may rethink that the next when they find out the machinery those employees were going to operate is backordered—or when they find out that energy costs have gone up so much that they cannot afford to offer the salaries they were planning to pay.

As a result, some job seekers may apply for jobs and never hear back, or the position may be eliminated before they get through the process. This confusion and uncertainty is frustrating employers and employees alike. It can make job seekers feel like they are going after a rapidly moving target.



"The increase in costs and expenses has a daily effect on every small business. Whether it is an unpredictable supply chain or the increases in other areas, many companies are holding off on expanding their workforce and are forced to make do with the resources they currently have available. We hear from many small businesses that they simply can't afford to pay higher wages, while also hearing from job seekers that they need to make more to offset the increased cost of living, gas, food, and houses. Many businesses find themselves at a stalemate, with an upward push on wages on one hand, but an inability to bring in more money as a result of the supply chain and other factors."

- Mike Brady, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Florida

4. Job Training and Skills



Even though employers seem desperate to fill jobs, they will not accept just any job applicant. Businesses still want to hire employees who have the basic knowledge and skills to perform the job well. The trouble is, so many job seekers have not had the opportunities to gain these skills, which could range from technical certificates for advanced manufacturing to necessary vocational licenses for service industry jobs.

Why do they lack these skills? One reason is that job seekers do not have the resources to acquire them. Another is that the educational system is not equipping students with in-demand skills and credentials. Yet another issue is that, unlike in past recessions, those who lost jobs in the 2020 recession did not or could not use the opportunity to pursue retraining or upskilling for in-demand careers—a topic explored in greater detail in the October 2021 Express white paper, "The Lost Generation."²⁴

In a 2020 Express-Harris Poll, nearly 90% endorsed the idea of an "education revolution." Four out of five (80%) said that schools are not preparing students with the skills they need to be successful in the workplace, and 80% also said that the education system has failed to evolve to meet the needs of the modern workforce.²⁵

According to that survey, which is explored in the Express white paper, "Education Revolution," the lack of training extends to soft skills." About half of employed Americans wish their high schools would have taught networking skills (51%) or offered interviewing tips or practice sessions (50%). In addition, 56% wish their high schools would have taught them how to handle real-life workplace situations like disagreements with colleagues. ²⁷



"Some manufacturing companies are starting or restarting apprenticeship programs to grow their own talent."

- Mike Nolfo, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, New Jersey

For years, Express has sounded the alarm about the mismatch between the skills required for jobs that are in demand and the skills possessed by people who need jobs. There is no sign that the situation has noticeably improved.





5. Work History and Criminal History

Another barrier closely connected to job training and skill is work history. The hot job market has led some workers to change jobs frequently, but that practice can backfire. Potential employers may see these "job hoppers" as unreliable. Why would they hire someone who has a history of leaving jobs after only a few months or weeks? That is often not even enough time for a new employee to get fully trained for their new position.





"While we have seen more applicants, the problem is most are unqualified or have a very poor work history. This includes job jumpers not staying in a position for more than three to six months in industrial workplace settings, and a lot of people in the administrative field staying less than a year in their prior role. On the other side, we are seeing a lot of people who have been displaced from the workforce for a while jumping back in, which is great news, but for many, that doesn't mean they have the available skillset after being on the sidelines for so long."

- Reggie Kaji, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Michigan

A criminal history can also pose a significant barrier for a job applicant—not because it makes the applicant unqualified for a job but because the application may not receive due consideration. Many businesses are still in the practice of automatically disqualifying or disregarding any applicant who possesses a criminal record—without looking into the nature and severity of the offense. A study by the National Institute of Justice found that "any arrest during one's life diminishes job prospects more than any other employment-related stigma." ²⁸



This practice can keep many otherwise capable individuals on the sidelines. An estimated 70 million Americans have a criminal record of some sort—an arrest or conviction. Every year, more than 600,000 people are released from jail having served their time.²⁹

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, larger businesses are recognizing the benefit of changing their ways: "Brands like Walmart, Starbucks and Home Depot have updated their hiring practices to include people with criminal records."³⁰

Even so, while the overall unemployment rate in America has been around 4% in 2021 and 2022, the unemployment rate for the formerly incarcerated has been around 27%.³¹ This creates an opportunity for businesses and individuals to tap into a pool of talent once they review and modernize their policies, while still balancing safety concerns.



"The primary reason open jobs go unfilled in our region is still the lack of transportation and failed background checks."

– Deb Gray, Express franchise owner, Pittsburgh West, Pennsylvania



6. Transportation and Geography



By necessity, many job seekers have to be picky about job location. They may only be able to commute to jobs that are accessible via public transit. Or due to fuel or other costs, they may only be able to commute a limited distance. Or, more problematically, promising job openings may be in one region while they live in another—meaning the only way to get a desirable job would be to relocate to another county or state.

Industrial jobs are often located outside of urban areas, where workers may be in shorter supply, as well as any available rail lines or buses. As the Wall Street Journal reports, one Iowa manufacturer, Pella Corp., has had such a hard time finding workers within commuting distance to their headquarters 45 miles from Des Moines, they've worked to make their community more attractive. Over the past three years, the company has facilitated tens of millions of dollars of investments, including in child care centers, housing, restaurants, and an entertainment center—all to make job seekers more willing to relocate.³²



Reinke Manufacturing, based in Deshler, Nebraska, decided to build an eight-unit apartment complex in its community recognizing that finding affordable housing within an easy commuting distance was a barrier for prospective employees. According to the Hebron Journal-Register, the company said the project was undertaken "in order to draw [more employees] to the community."³³

Pella's and Reinke's experiences illustrate that jobs and people are not always in the same location.



"Prior to the rising cost of fuel, we had people willing to commute farther for a job opportunity. Now, higher pay won't attract job seekers because the price of gas ultimately cancels out the higher earning potential. We have a huge transportation issue in southeast Michigan, so this impacts a lot of employers and job seekers. Additionally, we can't get enough bus drivers to run existing routes 24/7."

- Reggie Kaji, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Michigan







"There are a lot of people who are unable to afford to commute to work based on the cost of vehicle repairs, price of gas, or lack of public transportation. With transportation a growing issue across many communities, we have seen businesses change shift times to match local public transportation and bus schedules, in addition to offering flexible scheduling. Some companies are even paying mileage, offering increased pay, and adding sign-on bonuses for new staff, while also adding additional perks for working at their company, including some remote work as well."

- Stacey Snodgrass, Express general manager, Bellingham, Washington



"The first question we're asked by associates has gone from 'What's it pay?' to 'Where is it?' It's been difficult to find people who will go out to rural markets for an opportunity because of rising fuel costs and transportation issues."

– Greg Sulentic, Express franchise owner, Lincoln, Nebraska



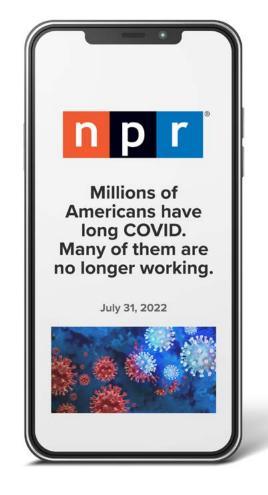
7. Health Issues and Concerns

Many Americans grapple with complex health and disability issues that keep them from working. But in recent years, health issues have been front and center due to COVID-19.

People who are immunocompromised or otherwise vulnerable may hesitate to work in positions that require frequent and close interactions with other people. Those who are paid hourly or have temporary jobs may lose their jobs if a COVID diagnosis sidelines them for a week—disrupting their work history and forcing them to start from square one. And outbreaks at schools and day cares can keep both children and parents at home. New CDC guidance noting the virus is "here to stay" will mean looser quarantine guidelines, but it does not mean the virus will stop circulating and disrupting work and job searches.³⁴ Nor does it mean people's fear will fully subside, especially as scientists report variants are becoming even more contagious.³⁵

Perhaps most alarming, though, is the number of Americans who contracted COVID-19 months ago and still experience debilitating symptoms. Recent estimates indicate 4 million Americans are out of work because of "long COVID"—a term used to describe various long-term disorders apparently triggered by the coronavirus. That's 2.4% of the U.S. working population, explains Brookings Institution senior fellow Katie Bach.

Because these conditions are still relatively new—and can vary significantly from person to person—businesses are not yet accustomed to making accommodations for employees in the same way they would for someone with other conditions or limitations.





"Long-term business success is most often the result of employing the right team members. Employers hire the 'whole person' and often that means understanding the motivators of each person. Turnover through the loss of a strong team member is absolutely detrimental for any business. For employees struggling with health concerns, knowing an employer is able and willing to collaborate or accommodate their health needs, as appropriate—more than the right schedule or the right salary—can make the difference in both the employee's life and the employer's bottom line."

- Deb Gray, Express franchise owner, Pittsburgh West, Pennsylvania

8. Communication Issues



The way we communicate has changed significantly in recent years, as the reliance on electronic communications continues to increase—and in-person, face-to-face communication is deprioritized. Communication preferences vary widely among people of different generations, which can create barriers for job seekers. As a result, job candidates often complain that they do not hear back from prospective employers about their applications. Likewise, employers often complain of job applicants "ghosting" them.

The disconnect in communication styles and preferences leads to various problems:

- An employer will assume an applicant lacks "soft skills." If an employer perceives that an applicant is not communicating directly or is responding too informally, they may assume this is indicative of poor communication skills and a lack of "soft skills" more generally. The issue might arise, for example, when an applicant relies only on texting or brief email, rather than returning phone calls.
- The applicant will feel uncertain about where they stand in the process. When an employer doesn't clearly communicate a job applicant's status in the hiring process or relies on impersonal automated updates, many applicants will assume they are no longer "in the running" and move on to other opportunities. This issue might arise, for example, when a company relies only on communications generated through its online job board.
- The employer will assume that the applicant is not truly interested. When an applicant fails to respond promptly or does not respond clearly to questions or interview requests, the employer may move on to other candidates or assume the applicant does not want the job. In reality, though, the applicant may be inexperienced at job hunting but still qualified and interested in the position.



"At Express, we use a personal connection to demonstrate interest in our candidates. Society has lost the human element by using only electronic applications, text messages, and emails to communicate. When having a phone call or video meeting with a candidate, you can really demonstrate the type of work environment you have and the type of employer you are by focusing on connection. We need to go back and focus on personal connection so job seekers can see the value of the opportunity and employment."

- Nancy Reed, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Texas





9. Workplace Culture Expectations

Some barriers are self-imposed. Perhaps the most notable is job seekers' workplace culture expectations. The abundance of jobs has given job seekers the sense that they can be more selective in the job search. In addition, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic made many Americans reevaluate what they want in a job and how they balance their time.

As a result, many job seekers may avoid or turn down opportunities with employers who do not clearly promise the type of culture they want.³⁸ They may look for the following as indicators of the culture they are seeking:

- Flexible work schedules
- Reasonable, predictable hours
- Flexibility in work location
- Clear opportunities for career advancement and professional development
- Clear communication about expectations and goals
- Welcoming attitude to people of all backgrounds
- Sufficient paid time off
- Generous benefits, including wellness and mental health support
- Employee appreciation events or perks
- Reputation for high employee satisfaction

Workplace culture can be difficult to measure and is often in the eye of the beholder. A job seeker will use the application and interview process to assess the company. If it seems that the employer does not treat employees well or does not pay attention to an employee's individual needs, concerns, or values, the job seeker will move on to the next opening.



"Employers in today's market must remember that they are in a competition for talent. Any sign that their company has a bad culture will harm their recruitment efforts. And the reputation of a bad or even toxic culture will be a hard thing to shake."

- Jon Noceda, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, California

10. Wage Expectations

Wages have been rising in America, but prices have been rising faster. And when prices rise faster than wages, a paycheck buys less and less.

Those on the sidelines looking for reasons to go back to work may feel less motivated if the buying power of a potential paycheck is shrinking. Certainly, many people now need extra income just to pay the bills. But for others who work by choice rather than out of necessity, it may be a less attractive proposition. Alternatively, if earning a paycheck means losing government benefits, there are other tradeoffs to consider.

"Real average hourly earnings" is a way of measuring wages that also takes into account inflation. And real average hourly earnings have been falling, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. From July 2021 to July 2022, real average hourly earnings were down 3%.³⁹ In other words, the numbers on an employee's paycheck may be bigger than they were a year ago, but in practical terms, they're making less due to inflation.

For someone who has been getting by without working, especially someone also facing one of the other nine barriers, the question they might be asking themselves is, "Why would I work now for less?"





"The government benefits being offered to some of our candidates are more attractive than obtaining employment, especially when the drop off from these services is so steep. There must be a middle ground solution, one that that encourages finding jobs while providing some supplemental benefits as needed on a sliding scale."

- Nancy Reed, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Texas

Breaking Barriers, Clearing Career Paths

Where does this leave us? Everyone—employers, employees, policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and educators—has a role to play in addressing these issues. It's not just individuals' livelihoods that are at stake. It's the strength of our overall economy.

Businesses are already taking some action. According to the most recent Express-Harris poll, four in five U.S. hiring decision-makers (80%) say their company is taking steps to make hiring easier—including offering higher starting salaries (33%) and hiring bonuses (29%).⁴⁰

More than a quarter report they are offering remote work (27%) and/or offering better benefits, such as more paid time off or flexible hours (27%)—all of which can help address child care, elder care, transportation, and health concerns.



Efforts in Making Hiring Easier





Higher starting salaries



Hiring bonuses



Remote work

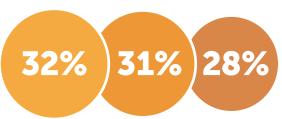


Better benefits

71% Hiring decision makers have modified benefits to retain employees

Around 7 in 10 U.S. hiring decision-makers (71%) also report their company has modified benefits in the hopes of retaining current employees or attracting new ones. Around 3 in 10 say they have increased the amount of paid time off offered to employees (32%), increased the amount of sick leave offered (31%), and/or offered additional healthcare incentives such as a gym membership or mental health resources (28%).

Better Benefits Breakdown



Increased paid time off

Increased sick leave

Additional incentives



"Employers should keep an open mind and look for work ethic more than skill set—are applicants or existing employees trainable? While it may sound counterintuitive, turnover is okay—hiring decision-makers should not get discouraged if it takes a few applicants to find the right fit. Furthermore, pay rates and flexible work schedules are key. The fact is that every company is competing against other companies in their area. Now's the time to ask: how do your company and opportunity compare to what your neighbors are offering?"

- Mike Nolfo, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, New Jersey

Companies may also need to examine the specific barriers in their job markets—and then work to help alleviate them the best they can. Are qualifications a dominant issue? Provide on-the-job training or partner with a local school to create earn-and-learn opportunities.

Is transportation the problem? Perhaps a shuttle service could be an answer. Or maybe a rideshare benefit until an employee has some additional money saved to secure transportation of their own.



"Across the board, we see much more flexibility from businesses than ever before."

- Reggie Kaji, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, Michigan



"In our area, we've seen businesses provide temporary gas assistance to help address transportation issues. When good talent comes in the door, businesses need to be creative and ask if they can afford to let that talent walk away due to a barrier."

- Joe Noceda, Express franchise owner, multiple locations, California

As always, overcoming some barriers will require the right level of drive, determination, and personal responsibility from the job seeker. But for everyone involved, the key will be understanding that new and growing problems will not be solved by old solutions.

Express Employment Professionals was founded on giving hope through jobs that help people provide for their families and giving peace of mind to employers in need of talented workers. Millions of people need that hope more than ever.







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- (defined as adults ages 18+ in the US who are employed full-time or self-employed, work at companies with more than 1 employee, and have full/significant involvement in hiring decisions at their company). The survey was conducted May 3-23, 2022. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within + 3.2 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest. All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Data weighted where necessary by company size to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.
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