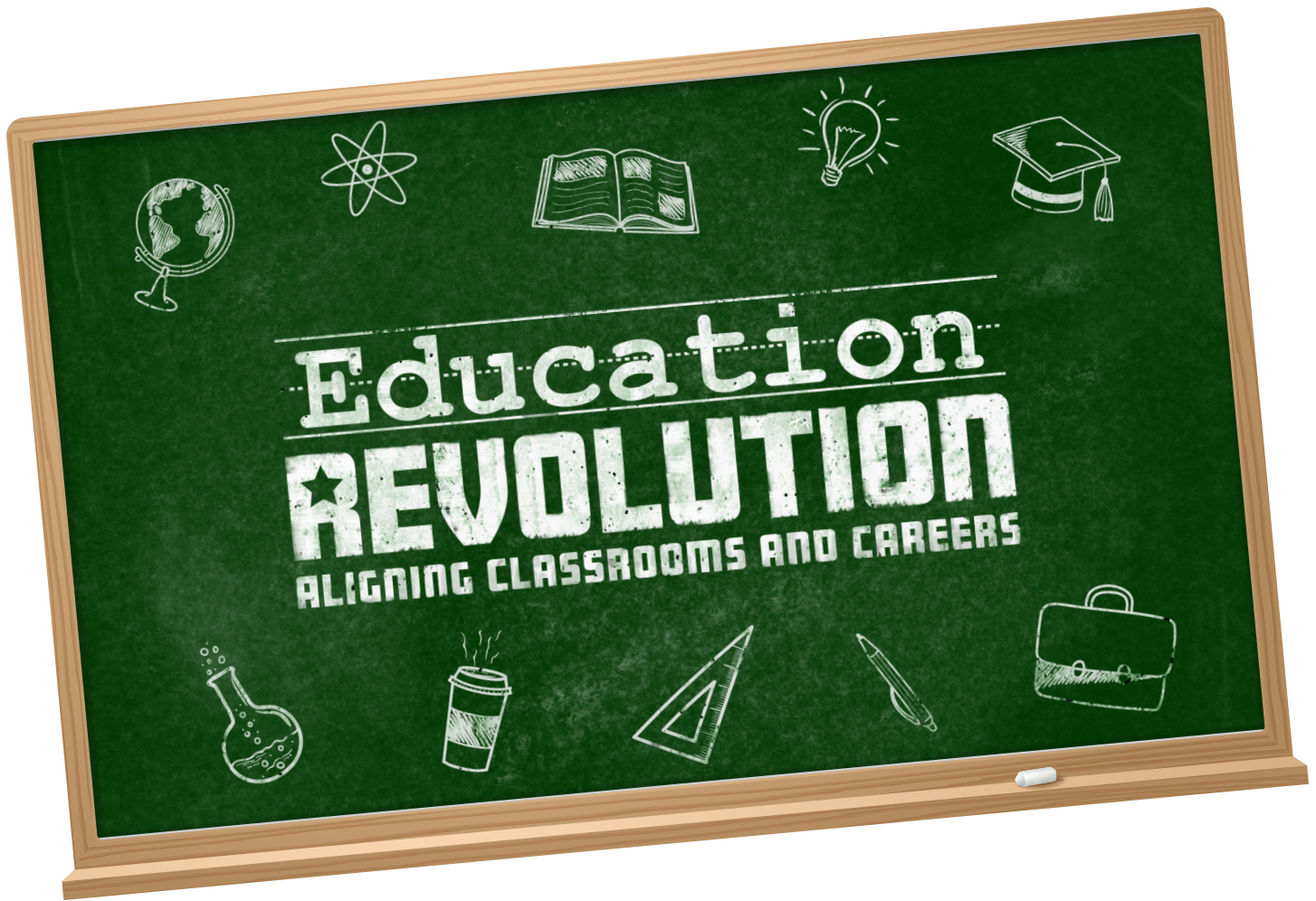




Respecting People. Impacting Business.™



How the System Fails to Prepare Workers—and What Needs to Change

An Express Employment Professionals White Paper

August 2020

[ExpressPros.com](https://www.expresspros.com)



“With an eye on the future, it’s time for educators, businesses and policymakers to come to the table and discuss where gaps exist in education and how to collaborate to bridge them. We recognize that teachers and professors do the best they can with the resources they are given, and we want to make sure their efforts are not in vain.”

*— Bill Stoller,
CEO,*

Express Employment Professionals



A NATIONWIDE STUDY

A national survey of 1,206 U.S. employees ages 18 and older was conducted online by The Harris Poll between Dec. 5 and Dec. 30, 2019. It offers a detailed, in-depth look at education and how it translates into the workplace. The survey was conducted among 1,206 U.S. employees (defined as adults ages 18+ in the U.S. who are employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed and have at least a high school diploma). Figures are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, income, marital status, employment, household size and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. No estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated; a full methodology is available upon request.

EDUCATION REVOLUTION: ALIGNING CLASSROOMS AND CAREERS

The education system does not work—at least not well enough for America’s workers. The gap between what students are taught and what they need to know when they enter the workplace continues to grow, leading to frustrated job seekers and employers.

We cannot expect that everything taught in high school or college will be useful in every workplace. The economy is too diverse for that. But shouldn’t schools cover some of the core competencies needed for virtually any successful career?

Americans think so. In fact, employees believe it’s time for a radical change—going so far as to endorse an “education revolution.”

According to the nationwide survey fielded by The Harris Poll for Express Employment Professionals, nearly 9 in 10 employees (87%) agree a whole new approach to education, skills training and learning—an “education revolution”—is needed to prepare people for the workforce. And 40% “strongly agree” with that sentiment. American workers are eager for something better.

It is easy to see the reason why. This disconnect between what’s taught in the classroom versus what’s needed in the workplace has real-life consequences. It restricts people’s ability to earn a living. It makes work frustrating and hiring difficult. It is, therefore, a drag on the U.S. economy. Adding the high cost of postsecondary education to the equation only creates more frustration.

American workers already face numerous barriers to finding and keeping a job, especially those who have been on the sidelines of the labor force.¹ Revolutionizing the education system could help change this.

The key challenges survey respondents identified include:

1. The gap between skills needed and skills taught
2. The lack of work study or earn-and-learn opportunities
3. The cost and utility of college and higher education

Regardless of whether government policy changes are made to address these concerns, it is critical for everyone—employers, educators, policymakers and more—to have a clearer understanding of employees’ relationships with and perspectives on the education system, as well as what each can do in response.



THE PANDEMIC EFFECT

The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted our economy but also our education system. Nearly every parent in America was asked to become a homeschooler overnight, facilitating virtual education or taking on the responsibilities of teaching. College students left for spring break in 2020 only to end up finishing their spring semesters at home. The entire country has been exposed to new models of learning and teaching, helping us to identify the most essential parts of the education system and rethink old models of learning.

Some students are unable to return to physical classrooms in fall 2020, and many displaced workers are looking to learn new skills or take on coursework to begin a new career. Some parents will feel uncomfortable sending their children back to school and may homeschool by choice, while college students may explore distance learning opportunities more readily.

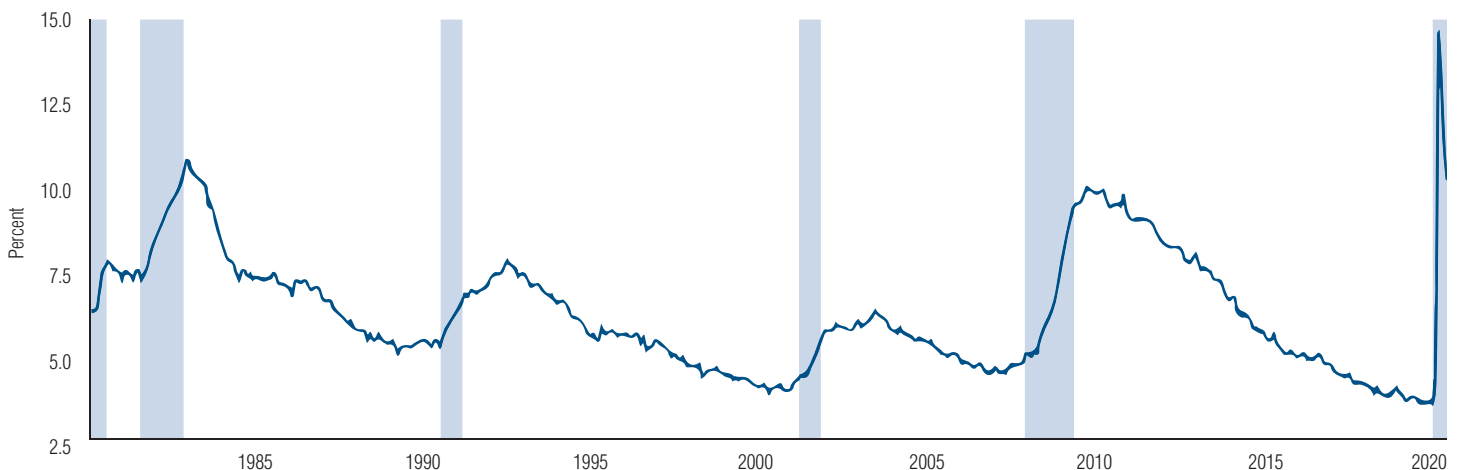
With so much rapid change underway, we should keep in mind what was not working with the education system before the pandemic—when too many students entered the workforce unprepared for the jobs available to them. This unwanted disruption is a challenge but also an opportunity to refocus curriculum on what Americans say matters for their careers.

THE RECESSION EFFECT

The 2020 recession, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, suddenly and dramatically reshaped the American economy, with the unemployment rate easily exceeding the alarming high seen during the Great Recession.²

Millions of Americans have been forced to look for new jobs, often far outside their previous industries. High unemployment could persist for years, with some major cities hit much harder than others.³ This will lead some Americans to pursue new education and training opportunities. Above all, it is a reminder that our goal should be an education system that helps workers navigate disruption and adapt to new circumstances and industries.

U.S. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 1980-2020⁴



Shading indicates U.S. recessions; the most recent one is ongoing.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

July 28, 2020⁵

Jobless Workers Fuel Surge in Demand for Startups Offering Retraining

Startups are seeing a surge in demand as they attempt to help the millions of unemployed job seekers with new technology-based approaches to retraining.

THE PROBLEM: SKILLS DISCONNECT

In the Express-Harris Poll, nearly 90% endorsed the idea of an “education revolution.” This need for change is a view shared by American workers of all ages.⁶



One reason for this view may be the disconnect between the knowledge and skills taught in school and those needed in the workplace. Four out of five (80%) say that schools are not preparing students with the skills they need to be successful in the workplace, and 80% also say that the education system has failed to evolve to meet the needs of the modern workforce.

“The education system needs to prepare students for the realities of their chosen profession. A “real expectations” course would be incredibly beneficial to increase understanding about key aspects of being successful in the workforce.”

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



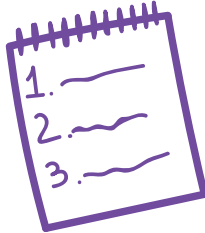
“While job seekers can use local programs to gain knowledge and experience, it would be great if this was an option in our public education system.”

— Jan Riggins,
Express general manager,
Fort Worth, Texas

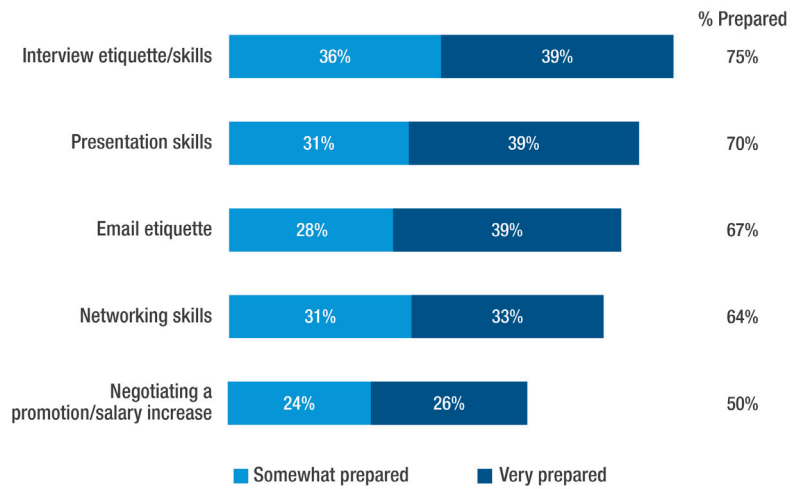


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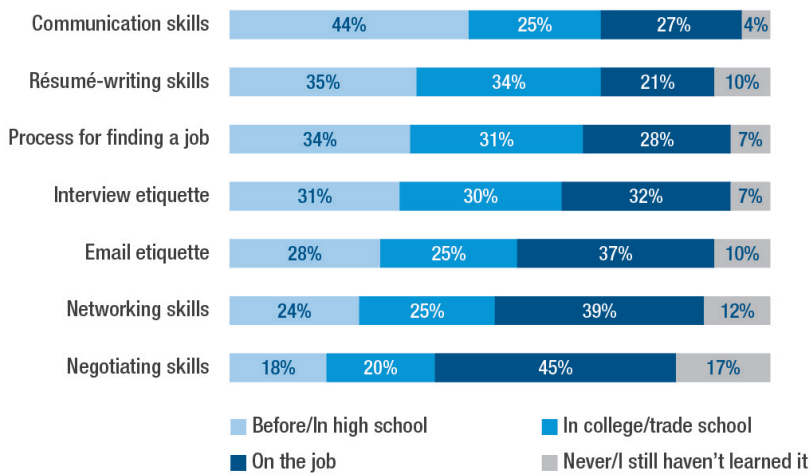
After entering the workforce following their highest level of education, the majority of U.S. workers say they felt prepared for various facets of work, but only 2 in 5, or less, said they felt very prepared.



Feelings of Preparation to Handle Aspects of Work



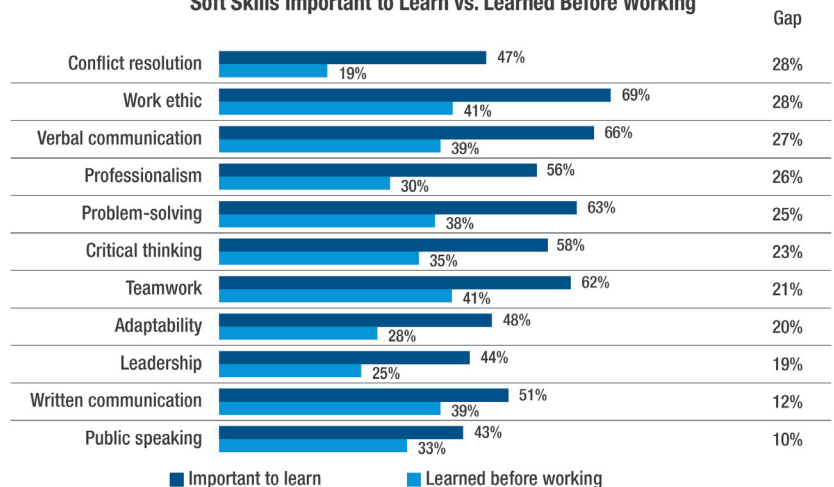
When Skills Were First Learned



Only about 1 in 3 report learning several important skills before or in high school, but many say they learned them while on the job or admit they have yet to learn them.

U.S. workers identify many soft skills as being “important to learn,” but for each one included in the survey, the number of respondents identifying a skill as “important” exceeds the number who said they learned the skill before working.

Soft Skills Important to Learn vs. Learned Before Working



Employees wish things were different. About half 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.

“As we’ve seen for quite some time, soft skills are lacking across the board. These skills need to be at the forefront now more than ever, given the virtual nature of many of our interactions.”

— Deidra Viney,
Express franchise owner,
Jersey City, New Jersey



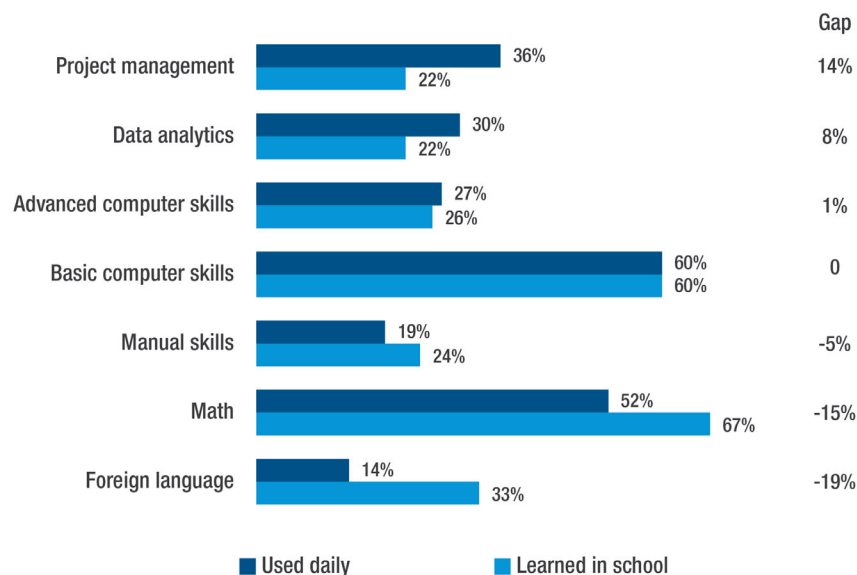
“Schools need to have more courses on softer skills, such as conflict resolution, managing people, having challenging conversations and communicating with diverse population groups.”

— Todd Isaacson,
Express franchise owner,
Longmont, Colorado



For hard skills, the story is a little different, but there’s still a mismatch—with the exception of basic computer skills—between hard skills that employees say are “used daily” versus the skills they say they “learned in school.”

Hard Skills Used Daily vs. Learned in School



Similarly, employees say basic economic skills like budgeting and managing finances are missing in schools—with 61% saying they wish their high school would have taught money management. One-third say they did not learn personal finances until they were on the job.

“Any sort of information technology skill will be useful for the long term.”



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

“I think the shift to virtual learning will help better transition the workforce to the work-from-home world. In high school, I think there needs to be more of an emphasis on vocational training.”



— Mike Brady,
Express franchise owner,
Jacksonville, Florida

The New York Times

July 13, 2020⁷

The Pandemic Has Accelerated Demands for a More Skilled Work Force

Job training in America has often been ineffective, with programs shaped by local politics and money spent according to the number of people in courses rather than hiring outcomes. The United States also spends less than other nations on government employment, training and other labor services. As a percentage of economic activity, Canada spends three times as much, Germany about six times more and Scandinavian countries up to more than 12 times as much, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

EARNING AND LEARNING: COMBINING EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Eighty-five percent of workers believe degrees should require on-the-job experience, not just coursework, yet close to half, 45%, say they did not participate in any work experience programs—such as internships, shadowing, apprenticeships, co-op placements—while in school.

Among those who did take part in a work experience program while in school, most (87%) say it prepared them for the workforce.

College vs. Vocational Training

Eighty-four percent of employees agree that colleges place more emphasis on grades than actually preparing workers for a job. Eighty-three percent say job training certificates do a better job of preparing people for the workforce than college does.

In other words, on-the-job learning shouldn't make up for the education system; it should become a more central part of the education system. And indeed, 87% of U.S. employees wish that they had more exposure to the world of work while they were in school.

Benefits for Employers

Participating in work-study programs offers benefits for employers, too. Apprenticeship programs, for example, “help businesses develop highly-skilled employees,” according to the U.S. Department of Labor.⁸

“Apprenticeship programs also **reduce turnover rates, increase productivity, and lower the cost of recruitment**. . .businesses may qualify for **state tax credits** available for apprenticeship program sponsors. Workforce systems and other community partners may also choose to contribute funding for training, supplies, or other aspects of apprenticeship programs. These benefits **reduce an employer’s investment** in apprenticeship training costs.”

— U.S. Department of Labor⁹

“There needs to be a way to bridge the gap between education and experience. Companies typically don’t hire right out of school. So, apprenticeship opportunities need to be integrated more successfully into the education piece.”

— Dwight Hahn,
Express franchise owner,
Windsor-Hartford, Connecticut



“We need to focus less on the traditional four-year degree and begin more hands-on internships and work experience in all fields. I think we need to teach soft skills as well as job function. Currently, we are not teaching the soft skills. Most of these are learned in our first jobs. However, many students leaving college haven’t worked and received that training. I think internships are a great way to educate on the soft skills.”

— Stephanie Miller,
Express franchise owner, Bend, Oregon



COLLEGE CONUNDRUM: ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY



Frustrations over the skills disconnect are compounded by the fact that postsecondary education—even an adequate education—can be extraordinarily expensive. Less than two-thirds (64%) of workers say a four-year college degree is the best avenue for career success.

Yet, more and more, Americans are loading themselves up with student debt in hopes of getting the best education possible—only to find that they are not prepared for the jobs they want and cannot pay off their debts with the jobs they can get.

WAS IT WORTH IT?

Two in three U.S. employees agree that a college degree is worth the cost (66%), though Gen Z is the generation least likely to agree with that statement. That's notable given that due to the increase in college costs, Gen Z is likely to face higher price tags for college than previous generations.¹⁰

Although 70% of employees agree that getting any degree is better than no degree, 61% also agree that an education is not actually necessary to be successful in their jobs. Only 18% say their education has been “absolutely essential” to their careers.

WHO SHOULD PAY?

The cost of college is generally rising much faster than inflation. That may help to explain the generational difference on who should pay for college.

Overall, 40% of those surveyed believe the student should be responsible, 28% say parents or family, and 27% say the government. But there are big disparities across generations, with Gen Z—the generation facing much higher college price tags—the most likely to believe the government should foot the bill.

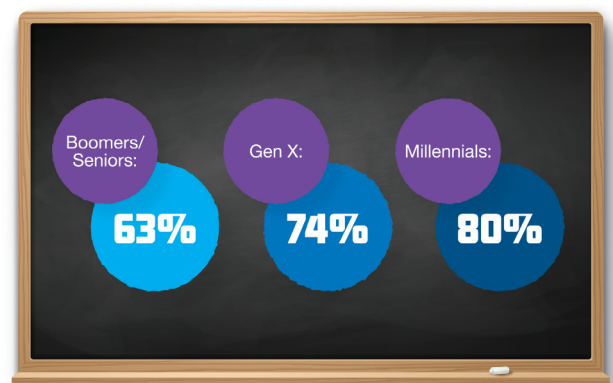
- **Government:** (Gen Z, 54%; Millennials, 32%; Gen X, 23%; Boomers/Seniors, 14%)
- **The student:** (Gen Z, 26%; Millennials, 33%; Gen X, 43%; Boomers/Seniors, 52%)

“A good rule of thumb is that tuition rates will increase at about twice the general inflation rate. On average, tuition tends to increase about 8% per year. An 8% college inflation rate means that the cost of college doubles every nine years.”

— Finaid.org¹¹

Coinciding with the increase in college costs across generations is the increase in the percentage of students who worked full-time jobs while in school.

Worked Full-time in College
(among employees who attended college)



Overall, 94% say they had a job while in school, with 74% saying it was full-time.

A NEW APPROACH: LIFELONG LEARNING

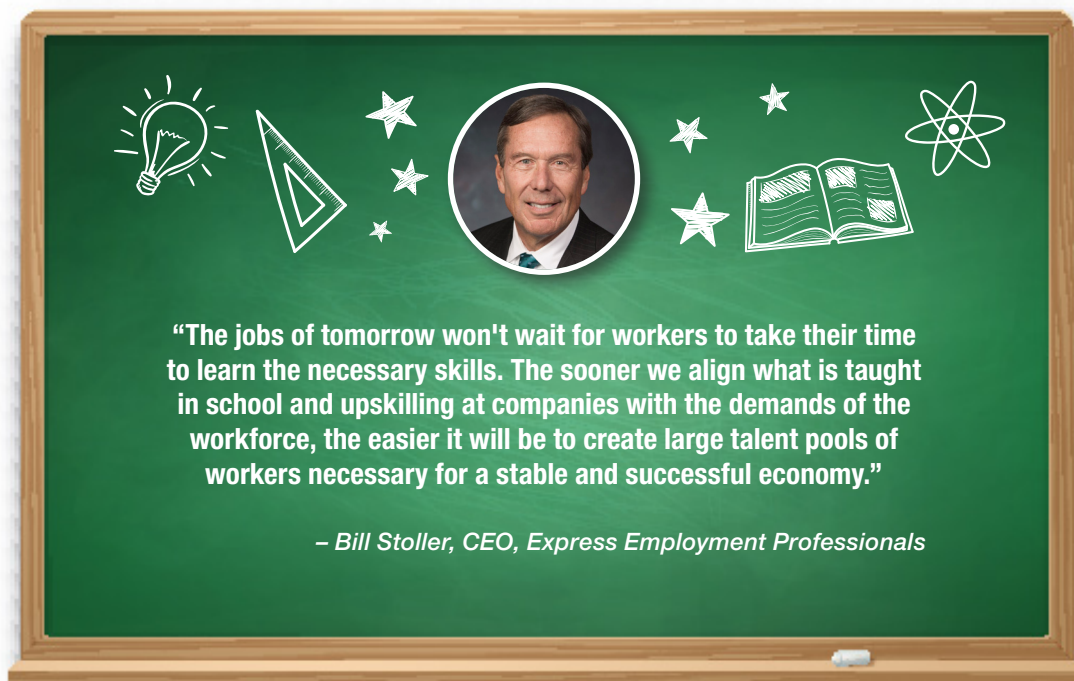
As important as it is to modernize secondary and postsecondary education, employees and employers alike must recognize that the economy and job market change too rapidly for anyone to be “done” learning or studying after high school or college.

Most employees (79%) agree that to remain competitive in their careers, learning cannot stop after graduation. They are right. According to a report presented at the World Economic Forum, to avoid a worst-case scenario of “technological change accompanied by talent shortages, mass unemployment, and growing inequality, reskilling and upskilling of today’s workers will be critical.”¹²

Yet only 33% of U.S. employees have returned to school after entering the workforce. This gap could be reflective of generally poor opinions about the usefulness of formal education as currently imagined or barriers to access, including cost.

Reasons for going back to school include thinking it would lead to salary increases (39%), to advance at a job (35%), to refresh existing skills (29%) or to change careers entirely (26%).

New educational opportunities are not found only at schools, of course. Many professional associations, across numerous sectors, provide opportunities for Americans to earn new credentials or skills certifications without ever having to enroll at a formal school or needing to depend on an employer to provide the opportunity.



UPSKILLING FOR THE FUTURE



“I do feel the giant machine that is ‘logistics’ will continue to be in demand for the foreseeable future. More than ever, we understand the importance of getting goods and supplies to their destinations as efficiently as possible.”

— Jan Riggins,
Express general manager,
Fort Worth, Texas



“Skilled trades are still some of the most in-demand jobs and will continue to be as the boomers continue to retire.”

— Mike Brady,
Express franchise owner,
Jacksonville, Florida

WORDS OF ADVICE

FOR STUDENTS

Change is needed. But reform often moves slowly. Students who enter the workforce in the coming years should work to identify careers that are in demand.

They should consider doing the following:

- Seek out opportunities in school or outside of school to hone job-seeking skills, as well as in-demand “soft skills” and technical skills.
- Research skills and qualifications that are required for in-demand jobs.
- Recognize that having a degree or certification in a given field does not guarantee employability in that field.

RESOURCES

Job Genius

ExpressPros.com/JobGenius

Express has crafted Job Genius, an educational program designed to teach young adults how to successfully enter the workforce.

The program includes guidance on résumé writing, interviewing, soft skills, and money management.

FOR JOB SEEKERS

Finding work is a challenge, especially if you’re told that you don’t yet have the right skills or experience after completing your education.

Keep in mind the following:

- You are not alone. This frustration is shared by many job seekers.
- You can find opportunities to gain tangible skills outside of a formal classroom setting.
- Demonstrating a willingness to learn when interviewing can help reassure a prospective employer about any skills you may lack.

RESOURCES

Get Ahead

ExpressPros.com/GetAhead

Through a video series and blog articles, Express offers tips on improving a résumé and preparing for an interview.

Job Journey

ExpressPros.com/JobJourney

In addition to articles on how to land a job, this Express blog offers help with how to handle a job offer, information on getting along with co-workers, ways to deal with a tough boss, retirement guides, and more.

Express Certifications

ExpressPros.com/Certifications

Express offers a Business Office Technology Certification and a Career Preparedness Certification, both of which are designed to verify individuals are fully prepared to enter the workforce.

When it comes to employer-sponsored education, more than 2 in 5 workers (42%) report their employers currently offer courses or programs for upskilling, and 10% are not sure.

“Level up! Use this time to improve or get a certification you do not have. For example, if you work in a warehouse, use that time to get forklift-certified. If you work in an office, get certified in something useful in your field. If you’re a driver, get your CDL.”



— Mike Brady,
Express franchise owner,
Jacksonville, Florida

FOR EMPLOYERS

- Provide structured opportunities for improving soft skills in the workplace, as this can be more effective than expecting employees to learn them ad hoc.
- Help local education officials understand the gaps in their curricula.
- Offer to partner with local high schools and colleges to offer work-study opportunities.
- Raise awareness among current employees about the opportunities they have for employer-sponsored education.



“The education system needs to put mechanisms in place to be able to shift and adapt to the needs of employers more quickly. The only certainty about the future of the workplace is that things will continue to change, and that rate of change will increase, so education mechanisms must be put in place to quickly respond to these changes and demands.”

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

FOR EDUCATORS AND REFORMERS

- Adjust curriculum to match career realities.
- Partner with local employers to understand what skills students need to refine before entering the workplace.
- Advocate reform with state and federal leaders.
- Partner with businesses to create opportunities for work-study, apprenticeships or other “earn and learn” models.



FOR CAREER COUNSELORS

- Help job seekers recognize their growth opportunities.
- Help job seekers understand what jobs will be in demand in their areas before they consider additional education.
- Provide referrals to resources to hone their skills.
- Reassure job seekers that they are not the only ones whose education may not have fully prepared them for the workplace.
- Coordinate with local educators and reformers to develop apprenticeship opportunities or work-study options.
- Investigate opportunities for grants that would support the development of apprenticeships or similar programs.

WAITING FOR A REVOLUTION



Many of today's students complete their coursework with the promise—explicit or implied—that they will be “career ready.” But those who are now in their careers, whether they have worked one year or 40—say that promise does not hold up.

Schools should modernize. Education needs a revolutionary change. But no one should wait around for it. We should all act now. And it's up to employers, educators, reformers, job seekers, and even students themselves to understand the system's shortcomings and adapt accordingly.

Everyone has a role in delivering the education revolution America's employees want and America's future employees deserve. That effort will be more successful if it is coordinated. Educators cannot spearhead an apprenticeship program without businesses providing the opportunities; businesses cannot build support for apprenticeship funding, for example, without the buy-in from reformers and policymakers. No one can solve this alone.



ABOUT EXPRESS EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS

At Express Employment Professionals, we're in the business of people. From job seekers to client companies, Express helps people thrive and businesses grow. Headquartered in Oklahoma City, OK, our international network of franchises offer localized staffing solutions to the communities they serve, employing 552,000 people across North America in 2019. For more information, visit ExpressPros.com.

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