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Express Employment Professionals  
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“Blue collar workers have always been the backbone of the American economy, and the COVID-19 pandemic provided a stark reminder for anyone who had forgotten that fact. These heroic individuals keep our country running with leadership that has earned them renewed respect in the eyes of Americans. And as the economy recovers, blue collar job prospects are more numerous and lucrative than at any time in recent history. Take blue collar workers’ word for it—now is the time to pursue one of these careers.”

*– Bill Stoller, Chairman and CEO, Express Employment International*





# Blue Collar America

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic disruption and recovery have led to big changes for America's blue collar workforce: they are more respected and appreciated, and they are even more in demand than before the pandemic.

But what do blue collar workers themselves think about it all? Do they feel confident about their future, anxious about their safety, or uncertain about future technologies?

A new survey from The Harris Poll, commissioned by Express Employment Professionals, answers those questions and more, building on a similar 2018 survey<sup>1</sup> of blue collar workers to paint a fuller picture of the blue collar workforce.

The findings are clear:

- Blue collar workers remain optimistic about the future.
- They feel more respected and appreciated than in the past.
- They are proud of the work they do, and the majority like the work they do.
- They encourage others to pursue similar careers.
- While they have concerns, the vast majority are not worried about losing their jobs or being replaced by automation.

Express Employment Professionals franchise owners—experts on their local economies—add their own insights to the survey findings. As they report, wages are soaring for blue collar workers, opportunities are abundant, and automation will actually create more jobs.

Welcome to Blue Collar America, where the future looks bright.

## DEFINING “BLUE COLLAR”

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of “blue collar workers” is the same as that used in the Express survey: employees who perform manual labor and work in agriculture, automotive services, construction, maintenance, manufacturing, transportation, or utilities.<sup>2</sup>

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.

## SURVEY DETAILS

A survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals between Sept. 28 and Oct. 13, 2021, among 2,002 U.S. adults ages 18+ who are employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed. Data were weighted where necessary by age, gender, education, race/ethnicity, region, household income, household size, and marital status to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. This sample of employees includes 209 blue collar workers (defined as employees who perform manual labor and work in agriculture, automotive services, construction, maintenance, manufacturing, transportation, or utilities).



# Changing Perceptions, Greater Appreciation

The COVID-19 pandemic put the spotlight on blue collar workers—the men and women who kept shelves stocked, continued making deliveries, produced essential products, and more.

When asked to elaborate, respondents offered views such as<sup>4</sup>:

“It became more obvious how much society at large relies on them.”

– Female, age 38, white collar

“Blue collar jobs became the needed backbone of the economy, as those workers continued to go to their jobs and get us or make for us the things that the general public needed.”

– Female, age 64, grey collar

“People view blue collar jobs as being more essential to the community and society since they have been working throughout the entire pandemic.”

– Male, age 38, white collar

“It has made people realize that blue collar jobs are essential to our society functioning properly.”

– Female, age 22, grey collar

“I think blue collar jobs are more widely accepted and appreciated than before, as these individuals are relied upon heavily during the pandemic.”

– Male, age 37, white collar

“They are the necessary labor backbone of the country.”

– Male, Age 68, white collar

Nevertheless, more than 6 in 10 (62%) blue collar workers say society generally looks down on them. But 60% of blue collar workers and 70% of white collar employees agree that having a blue collar job is respected more now than it was 10 years ago.<sup>5</sup>



“The pandemic caused the world to learn the value of blue collar workers. Across the board, people learned that they need blue collar workers and without them, we can’t move forward as individuals or businesses. The skill set that comes with blue collar roles is harder to do without (welders, construction trades, forklift drivers, machine operators). Those skills are vital to producing products, shipping products, and making things happen. We have learned to value these skill sets and are now changing our tune with students to encourage them to take a more skilled trade career path if college is not for them.”

– Nancy Reed, Express franchise owner, Brownsville, Southwest Dallas, Harlingen, and Weslaco, Texas



“Do you want your goods delivered to your door? Or for your electricity to stay on? Do you need repair work done on your home or business? How about your favorite grocery items stocked at your local grocery store, or even the store itself to be open? If you said ‘yes’ to any of these questions, you’re dependent upon the blue collar worker for these luxuries. Blue collar workers are the reason essential services are up and running. Their impact is not celebrated as much as it should be in the aftermath of the pandemic, especially during the height of it.”

– Greg Sulentic, Express franchise owner, Lincoln, Nebraska

**The historic time altered perceptions of their industries.**

Two-thirds of blue collar workers

**67%**

believe the COVID-19 pandemic changed how people view blue collar jobs.

**75%**

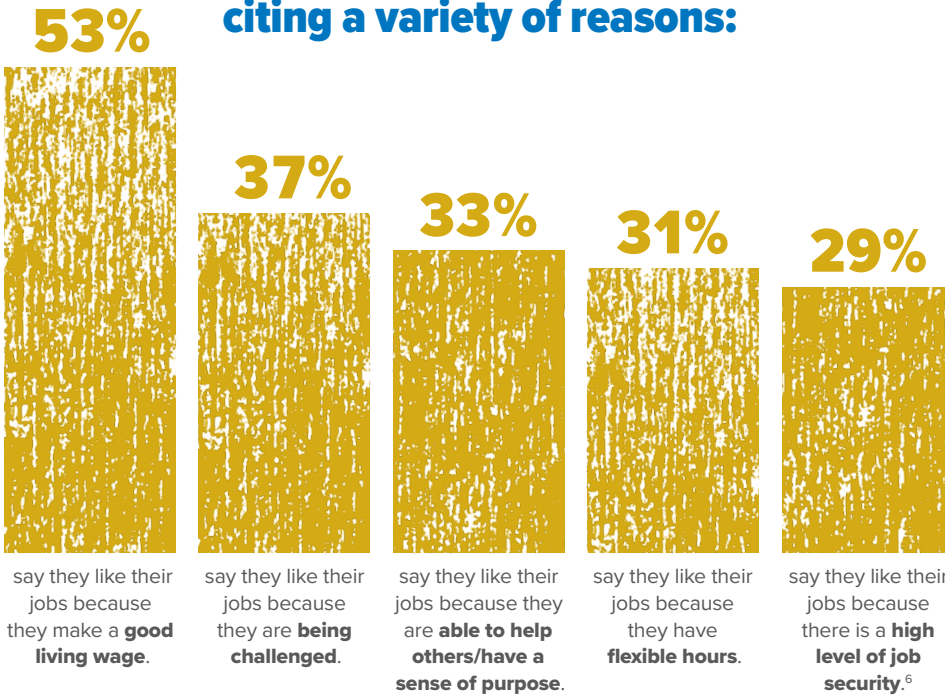
of white collar workers agree with this sentiment.<sup>3</sup>



# Meaningful Work

Regardless of how they feel others view them, the vast majority of blue collar workers (91%) say they are proud of the work they do. When asked to describe how they currently feel at their jobs, a large majority (84%) use positive words—such as knowledgeable (53%), confident (46%), and valued (44%).

## Overall, 62% like their jobs, citing a variety of reasons:

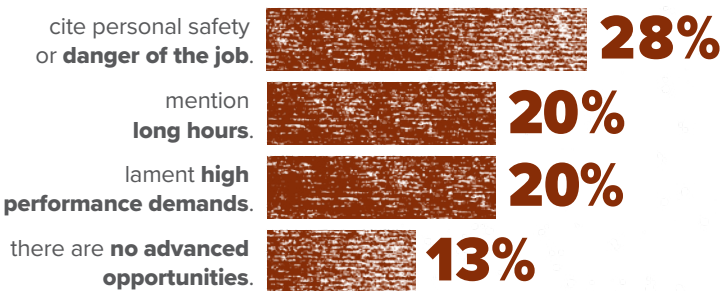


# 74%

of blue collar workers say there is a good career in their line of work.

Nearly three-fourths of blue collar workers in the U.S. (74%) say there is a good career path in their line of work.<sup>7</sup> That's the same percentage as the 2018 survey.<sup>8</sup>

## Even with this general positivity, blue collar workers have concerns:



The pandemic may have made blue collar workers feel more appreciated, but it has also added new stresses and pressures to their jobs—especially as they feel the effects of a strained labor force.

Nearly three quarters (73%) of blue collar workers say their work-life balance has been impacted by the current labor shortage. More blue collar workers than white collar workers (60%) say this. Nearly two in five (37%) blue collar workers have had a heavier workload due to staff shortages.



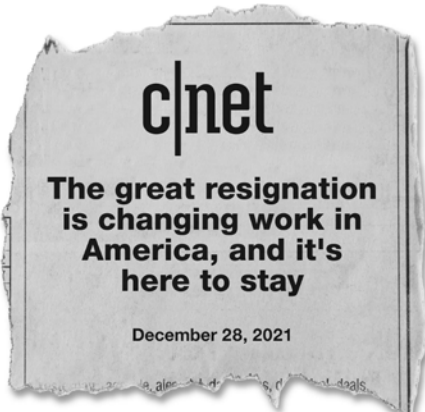
# Blue Seeing Green: A Hot Job Market

Employers are desperate for blue collar talent, and as a result, many blue collar workers are cashing in, as employers compete for employees who are in short supply.

Back in 2018, human resources leaders were already sounding the alarm about the shortage of blue collar workers or a “blue collar drought.”<sup>9</sup> It is a shortage that has persisted even after—in some cases because of—the disruptions of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

A study from the Conference Board finds that the “severe labor shortages will continue through 2022.” As a result, the study predicts, “overall wage growth is likely to remain well above four percent.” And blue collar workers are particularly in luck. “Wages for new hires, and workers in blue-collar and manual services jobs will grow faster than average.”<sup>11</sup>

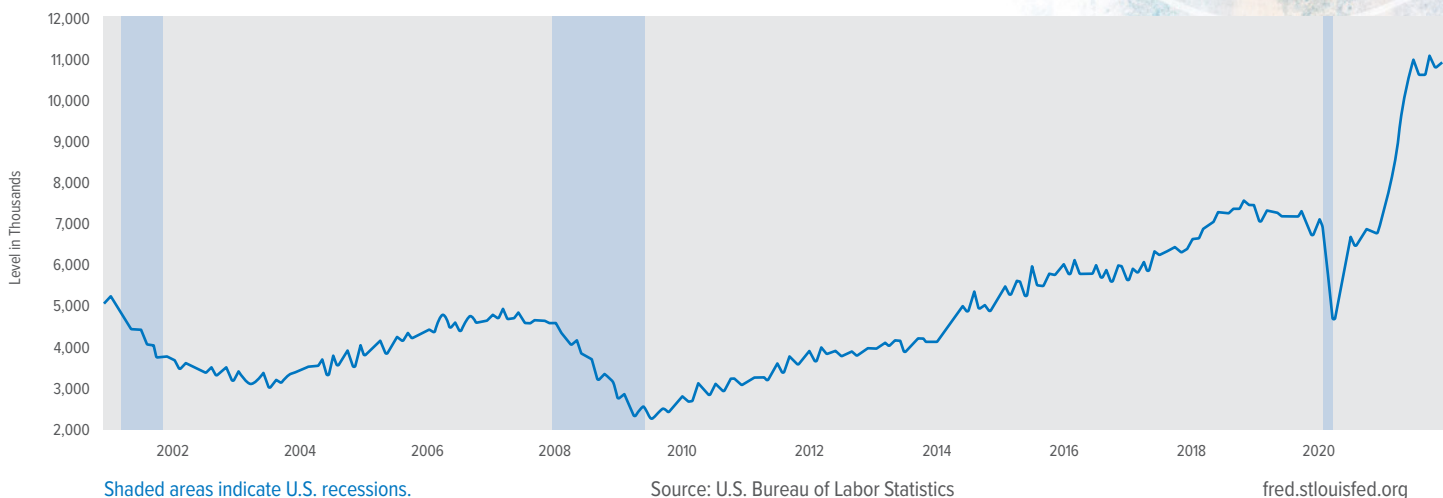
Their research also indicates that companies are setting aside more and more money to increase compensation. Budgets for raises or wage hikes are expected to increase at the fastest rate since 2008.<sup>12</sup>



“Americans have been quitting their jobs by the millions over the past year, jumping from one company to another in record numbers, often for better pay if they're low-wage workers, or better benefits if they're in white-collar jobs.”<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 1: Job Openings of All Types: Total Nonfarm December 2000–December 2021<sup>14</sup>**





## Figure 2: Job Openings by Industry, December 2021 and December 2020

Industry	December 2021	December 2020
Construction	337,000	267,000
Manufacturing	856,000	479,000
Trade, transportation, utilities	1,868,000	1,215,000
Mining and logging	46,000	21,000

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>15</sup>

## Express Franchise Owners on the Blue Collar Job Market



“Blue collar workers are like draft picks. They are in high demand and are getting paid to move to the highest bidder, and then move again to the next highest bidder. The \$14 worker two years ago is very likely earning \$18, \$19, or even \$20 for the exact same job today. The pandemic has benefited those who want to work in skilled trades jobs by elevating their presence and essential role in our society.”

– **Greg Sulentic**,  
Express franchise owner,  
Lincoln, Nebraska



“There are literally 10 job openings for every applicant. Individuals can pick the job and get better than average pay for the job!”

– **Mike Brady**,  
Express franchise owner,  
West Jacksonville, Florida



“Blue collar jobs have some of the lowest unemployment percentages in the country and wages have jumped substantially. We also have seen a high demand for trade workers, and with the rising cost of college, it’s a career route that may be better for long term sustainability. It’s crazy how much more demand there is for blue collar workers today compared to two years ago. The demand was high then, but it’s out of control now.”

– **Reggie Kaji**,  
Express franchise owner,  
Tecumseh, Brighton, Dearborn,  
and Monroe, Michigan

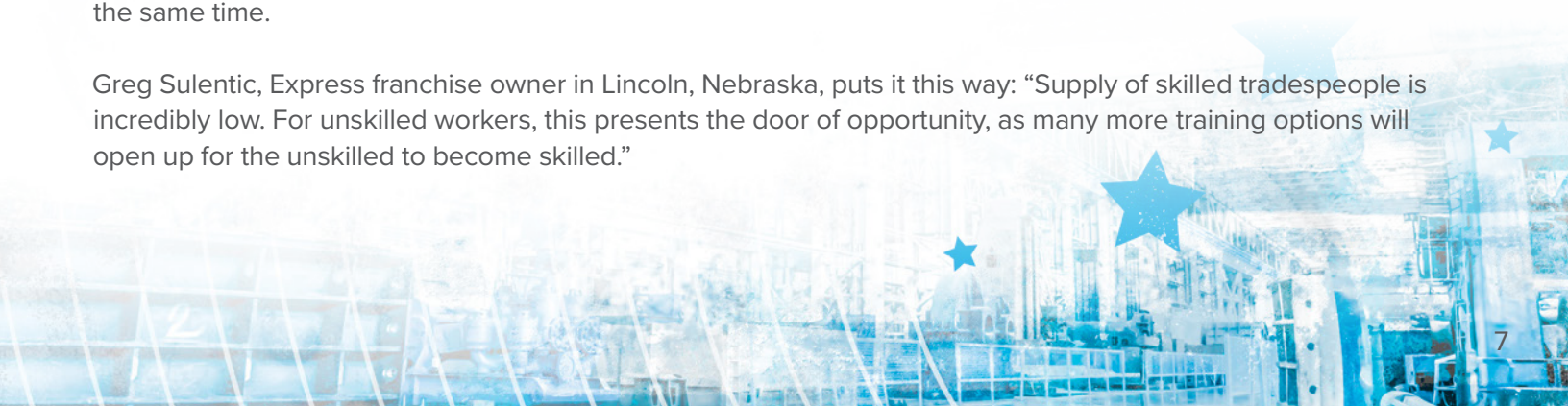


“Now is definitely the time to be in the market for a blue collar job. Blue collar employees have choices of where to work and have real negotiating power regarding compensation!”

– **Nancy Reed**,  
Express franchise owner,  
Brownsville, Southwest Dallas,  
Harlingen, and Weslaco, Texas

With this many job openings, employers are even more willing to provide training to prospective employees who may not have quite the right skills. This makes these jobs even more attractive, particularly for those who don’t currently possess a specialized degree or certification, because they can land no-cost training and a quality job at the same time.

Greg Sulentic, Express franchise owner in Lincoln, Nebraska, puts it this way: “Supply of skilled tradespeople is incredibly low. For unskilled workers, this presents the door of opportunity, as many more training options will open up for the unskilled to become skilled.”





# Outlook: Career and Country

Looking beyond the present moment, blue collar workers are positive about the future.

**73% of blue collar workers express optimism about the future**  
**30% say they are very optimistic<sup>16</sup>**

Most still say they can make ends meet (84% in 2021 and 84% in 2018), remain confident that they will be able to reach their lifestyle goals (75% and 78%, respectively), and are satisfied with the lifestyle that they have (63% and 67%).<sup>17</sup>

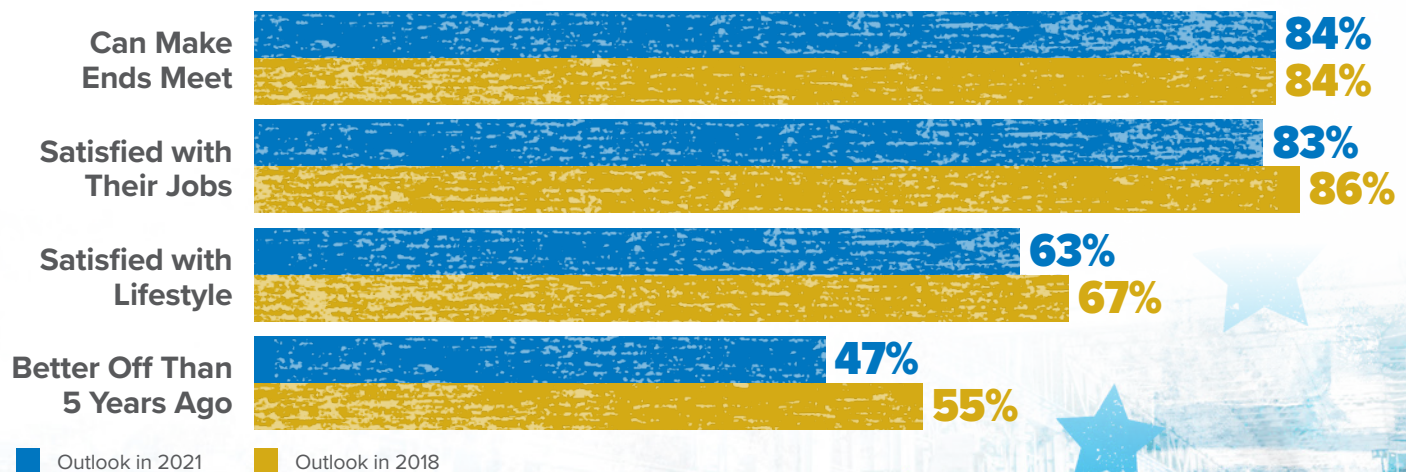
On the other hand, 66% of blue collar workers say they are worried about saving enough for their retirement. That's a particularly important concern for blue collar workers. If retirement ages rise, blue collar workers could feel harsher consequences than white collar workers. Because blue collar jobs require more physical labor, blue collar workers may not be able to delay retirement. And because of that physical labor, they may be more likely to need to retire earlier. As such, they may struggle to transition easily from work to retirement with "full benefits."<sup>18</sup>

Nearly half (47%) say they are better off than they were five years ago, a notable stat considering the effects of the pandemic. That compares to 55% in 2018.<sup>19</sup>

**83% are satisfied with their jobs**  
**30% say they are "very satisfied"<sup>20</sup>**

Consistent with the prediction about rising pay, 64% received a pay increase in the past year. Nearly one-third (31%) of those who ever received an increase at their current job received one of 10% or more. More than half (58%) believe they will receive a pay increase within a year.<sup>21</sup> In addition, 44% were given increased responsibilities, and 31% received a promotion in the past year.

## Blue Collar Workers: Outlook in 2021 compared to 2018





# Who's Doing What

On average, U.S. blue collar workers have been working for 25 years and have spent 10 years in their current jobs. They work on average 41 hours per week, with 20% working 50 or more hours per week.

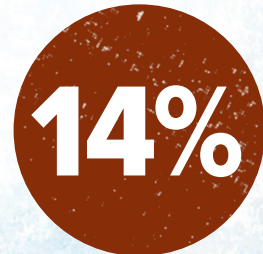
**AVERAGE  
41 HOURS  
PER WEEK**



**Per Week**



**Avg. Career Length**



**say using technology is a significant part of the job**



**are members of a labor union**



**84%** are paid hourly

## What's the biggest misconception about blue collar jobs?



“The misconception I hear most is that blue collar jobs are only filled by men. Not true! Women are in the blue collar sector, and they’re working more and more in fields that were previously male dominated. Skilled trades are not gender specific trades.”

– **Greg Sulentic,**  
Express franchise owner,  
Lincoln, Nebraska



“The biggest misconception is that blue collar work is a ‘dead-end’ job. Nothing is further from the truth. There is so much opportunity and upward mobility for those who build careers in the skilled trades. Like with any profession, if you’re willing to learn, grow, and put in the work, the sky’s the limit!”

– **Mike Brady,**  
Express franchise owner, West  
Jacksonville, Florida



“The biggest misconception about blue collar workers has been about starting wages being low. Over the last few years, we are seeing wages of blue collar workers accelerating faster than the white collar sector. In fact, blue collar workers are earning over 20% higher wages, while white collar workers are only earning 5% higher wages over the same period of time. Wage compression is real! Blue collar work is becoming a viable career path that can support a family with endless opportunity.”

– **Mike Nolfo,**  
Express franchise owner,  
Parsippany, Fairfield, Bloomfield,  
Hackettstown, and Hawthorne,  
New Jersey



“There is a misperception that blue collar jobs don't provide options for those working in blue collar fields. Blue collar workers are what has driven America, and the men and women in those fields are now realizing they have countless career choices! They want to take their time and pick the right position. They are also the ones aging—baby boomers—and retiring at a rapid rate.”

– **Nancy Reed,**  
Express franchise owner,  
Brownsville, Southwest Dallas,  
Harlingen, and Weslaco, Texas



# Automation and the Future of Blue Collar Work

Just as there are misperceptions about the state of blue collar workers today, there are misperceptions about what the future for blue collar work will look like.

Contrary to those who discount the long-term opportunities in the field, nearly three-quarters (74%) of blue collar workers believe there is a good career path in their line of work, and a similar proportion (73%) believe more young adults should pursue careers in their field. Nevertheless, 67% say they wish they had more exposure to the world of work when they were in school, and 59% say they would've had more opportunities available to them if they had gone to college/university.<sup>22</sup>

More than 2 in 5 (42%) believe there will be more jobs available in their field in the next 10 years, up from 2018 (35%). Just 26% believe there will be fewer jobs available.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most commonly heard views about blue collar careers is that automation will displace these workers. But among blue collar workers, it hardly seems to be a concern. Just 8% are concerned about being replaced by automation. Only 7% worry about losing their jobs in the near future, down from 13% in 2018.<sup>24</sup>

Automation will certainly create change, but it won't erase the need for blue collar talent. As Express franchise owner Nancy Reed explains, "We have learned that with automation comes the need for people to manage these machines. We need the skilled trades person to spec out the machines and double check the quality to ensure production and safety continue."



"Eventually AI will become cheaper, more advanced, and easier to attain—but that doesn't mean blue collar workers won't still be in high demand. Skilled tradespeople will be vital to the future of AI. No different than any profession, various aspects of this field will evolve, and those who are evolving with it, upskilling, and reskilling as needed, will continue to be in high-demand."

– **Greg Sulentic**,  
Express franchise owner,  
Lincoln, Nebraska



"I see the most promise for a steady, rewarding blue collar career in the fields of skilled trades, logistics, supply chain, robotics and automation."

– **Reggie Kaji**,  
Express franchise owner,  
Tecumseh, Brighton, Dearborn,  
and Monroe, Michigan



"What I think really needs to be hammered into the discussion about blue collar work is the high level of skill and training that goes into these types of jobs. The average person doesn't think about engineering and robotics when they think blue collar jobs, but they should."

– **Mike Nolfo**,  
Express franchise owner,  
Parsippany, Fairfield, Bloomfield,  
Hackettstown, and Hawthorne,  
New Jersey



"While any skilled trade will provide a rewarding career, transportation and logistics will undoubtedly continue to skyrocket in demand and opportunity."

– **Mike Brady**,  
Express franchise owner,  
West Jacksonville, Florida





# The Path Ahead

The pandemic has led many to rethink what blue collar work means for the country and the career opportunities it presents. But too many are still quick to dismiss these jobs and the people who do them.

So much of what was true in 2018 when Express released its first report on Blue Collar America remains true today:

*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.*



“High schools need to start talking to students about different career opportunities in blue collar jobs. College does not need to be the only path and with proper education about the realities of what truly is a skilled trade and blue collar job, I’m hopeful more students will be excited for such career paths.”

– Nancy Reed, Express franchise owner, Brownsville, Southwest Dallas, Harlingen, and Weslaco, Texas

The pandemic has proven just how essential America’s blue collar workers truly are. But if attitudes and education systems do not change, the day may come when there are not enough blue collar workers to respond to a national crisis.

There’s a world of promising opportunities in blue collar America. We just need more people to seize them.





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