


EDUCATION INDEX:

Learning Curve

Data from the new 2023 *EdAssist by Bright Horizons*[®] Education Index tells a story: that the ongoing age of uncertainty is creating a generation of working learners.



Employees today are thinking a lot about their education, their security, and their future career goals – and it’s collectively fueling what they want from their employers.

In the era of rapid-fire advancements, new data from the 2023 EdAssist by Bright Horizons Education Index – conducted by the market research and analytics firm The Harris Poll – shows upskilling is parked firmly on the front burner, with workers angling to learn, looking for new opportunities, and being driven by a need to stand out in their respective fields.

At a time when AI advancements are upending entire industries, the survey of over 2,000 U.S. employees shows education ambitions across the workforce are at an all-time high:

- › **77%** are interested in developing new skills or pursuing additional education
- › **55%** are feeling pressured to stay competitive in their industry
- › **68%** wish their employer offered more opportunities to take their career to the next level

This could be considered great news for business leaders, but with caveats. The same transformations worrying employees, after all, are also disrupting a wide range of industries – from healthcare to tech – meaning organizations will need workers with new skills to keep pace.

Yet most respondents (91%) say there are barriers to pursuing additional education, most notably the cost of tuition (56%), that are preventing them from these opportunities. Additionally, employees – particularly women (34%) – say they haven’t had critical discussions with managers in the past year (29%) that could make or break career paths. These obstacles hinder both employees’ and employers’ ability to reach learning and skills goals and will need employers’ directed efforts to be addressed.

Moreover, external stressors are leading a whole generation of working learners towards considering different paths to developing new skills. The desire to avoid large amounts of debt has many prioritizing return-on-investment over prestigious degrees, choosing to work for employers willing to take on a portion of the cost.

48%

In fact, nearly half (48%) seek to disrupt the existing school-to-work equation, opting instead to enter the job market in a less advanced job, and then receive an employer-sponsored education later.

WHAT HOLDS LEARNERS BACK

The Scarcity of Money and Time

The Education Index shows distinct trends, including what keeps people from learning. In an era of skyrocketing education costs and associated debt, it should be no surprise that money tops the list of roadblocks, with 56% of employees citing cost/tuition as the biggest obstacle to pursuing additional education. Yet in a period of record burnout, a shortage of time is close behind, with 47% of employees citing existing work obligations, and 42% citing the amount of time it takes to complete an education program as barriers.

Perhaps that explains pushback against traditional college programs. Instead of defaulting to a four-year degree and all its associated debt, the vast majority (89%) of today's employees are looking for the best return-on-investment (ROI) potential of additional education. Many (65%) say the days of needing a traditional college degree to get a good job are over, with the majority (77%) believing other forms of education like certifications and online courses offer more “bang for your buck” than a traditional college degree.

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77%

believe other forms of education have more value than a degree

The Confidence Conundrum

Employers seeking to solve time- and money-related obstacles will need to actively bridge the divide. Specifically, managers will need to help employees overcome both breakdowns between employee/leader communication and disconnects between the goals people have for careers and their perceived potential to achieve them.

This is especially true for frontline workers who are notably short on manager support. While these employees are significantly more likely than non-frontline counterparts to have had career discussions with managers (74% vs. 67%) in the past year, the confidence stops there. Frontline employees are more likely than other employees to both wish for more guidance from employers on career paths and goals (63% vs. 57%); to desire some form of coaching or guidance while learning (89% vs. 84%); and to worry they won't have employer support when pursuing education opportunities (49% vs. 42%).




WHO IS LEARNING AND WHY

For Gen Z and Millennials, Cash is King

Today's younger employees are hyper-focused on finances. Millennials are significantly more likely than Boomers (73% vs. 58%) to pursue additional education with the goal of a pay raise, and more likely than Boomers (57% vs. 32%) to say their primary goal in pursuing additional education opportunities would be future career opportunities – something that's arguably tied to desired wage growth. This likely explains why those same young employees are the most focused on growing skills, with the vast majority of both Millennials (86%) and Gen Z (87%) interested in developing new skills or pursuing additional education.

Boomers and Gen X: A Mistake to Count Them Out

Upskilling is not just a dream for the young. Skills are a recognized currency across generations, evidenced by the number of more established employees who are eager learners themselves. Though less prominent, even over half (58%) of Boomers and the majority (74%) of Gen X are interested in developing new skills or pursuing additional education, compared to their Millennial (86%) and Gen Z (87%) counterparts. Additionally, more than a third of Gen X (43%) and Boomers (32%) are motivated to pursue continuing education by future career opportunities. That means Gen X and Boomers aren't just biding their time until retirement; rather, in an era of worsening skills gaps, they remain both vital players in the workforce and a rich source of willing and able participants in an effective upskilling strategy.



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MEN, WOMEN, TIME, AND MONEY

Concerns about time and money differ by gender, with significantly more men (52% vs. 42% of women) citing work obligations as one of their main barriers to continuing their education, while significantly more women (61% vs. 52% of men) cite cost/tuition as one of their main barriers. Additionally, women were significantly more likely than men to feel stressed (38% vs. 26%) or overwhelmed (37% vs. 22%) by the thought of undertaking additional education.

While both men and women appear to feel the pressure to stay competitive in their fields, men are significantly more likely to say that they feel high pressure to stay competitive in their industry (61% vs. 49%). That may explain why men are also more open about the pressure they feel to advance their careers and their interest in developing skills.

	PRESSURE TO ADVANCE CAREERS	INTERESTED IN ADDITIONAL EDUCATION/SKILL DEVELOPMENT
MEN	51%	81%
WOMEN	44%	74%

Men and women also receive different levels of support from their managers, with men (77%) more likely than women (66%) to report having important career-trajectory conversations with management in the past year. Consequently, it's no surprise that men are also more likely than women to feel excited about additional educational pursuits (40% vs. 33%), more inspired by them (45% vs. 32%), and more prepared (28% vs. 16%).

FRONTLINE WORKERS SKILL UP TO MOVE UP

Much has been written about frontline workers' desires to pave upwardly mobile futures. Education Index data falls in line with those accounts, finding that frontline/essential employees are feeling pressure to earn certifications or credentials. In fact, 77% have already completed a form of additional education (compared to 71% of non-frontline colleagues) and 71% of essential employees express positive feelings about pursuing additional education in the future (compared to 65% of other workers).

40% FRONTLINES WHO ARE VERY INTERESTED IN DEVELOPING NEW SKILLS OR ADDITIONAL EDUCATION

31% ALL OTHER WORKERS

OPPORTUNITY GAP AND CHALLENGES TO DEI

A key insight from the 2023 Index data is how educational opportunities can both help – and hinder – underrepresented populations.

Responses show clearly that Black and Hispanic employees are more likely to feel pressure to advance in their careers. As a result, these employees are among the most enthusiastic audiences for learning opportunities. Yet conversely, they report feeling among the least supported, and are more likely to want more information on what options are available. They're also considerably more likely than white employees to wish their employer provided more guidance on how to accomplish their learning goals, and to worry their employer wouldn't support their educational pursuits.

	BLACK EMPLOYEES	HISPANIC EMPLOYEES	WHITE EMPLOYEES
Feel pressure to advance in their career	56%	56%	43%
Cite positive feelings when thinking about continuing education	88%	80%	61%
Very interested in developing new skills	52%	52%	29%
Strongly wish for more guidance on how to accomplish education goals while working	26%	25%	16%
Strongly want more info on education options/opportunities available to them	38%	32%	20%
Worry employer wouldn't support their educational pursuits	56%	55%	42%

Such disconnects have far-reaching consequences, since the absence of support both detours engaged employees from the skills they desire, and risks widening the very opportunity gaps DEI programs are designed to address.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR EMPLOYERS

Talent remains the biggest challenge for employers. However, the calculus is changing, with the talent market pivoting from a war merely for hires to a war for skills. Employees understand the vitality of this movement – they recognize skills as currency, they’re making job choices accordingly, and they’re more likely than ever to gravitate to employers that support their educational pursuits. Additionally, in an era where up-to-date competencies are just as important for organizations, employees are standing firm on what they need to achieve them:

71% want more information on what education options or opportunities are available to help them advance in their career

52% say coaching and guidance around finances would be most helpful while pursuing additional education opportunities

86% say an employer paying for future education would be a very valuable benefit in today’s world

74% value employers who pay off employees’ debt from past education

91% of frontline workers want education benefits provided by their employer

For employers, responses are both a warning sign and a roadmap. Survey data not only highlights employees’ educational preferences and needs, it also illuminates potentially large-scale impediments to employers’ ability to enable mutually beneficial upskilling. Yet there are bright spots as well. The same knowledge about obstacles and desires can inform benefits choices and overall talent strategy, both of which can help companies fill critical talent and skills gaps across their organizations. What’s more, survey responses show the very same education benefits that will support an organization’s essential competencies will also fuel returns such as employee engagement, recruitment, and retention. The bottom line: employees’ desire to work for you may well depend on their ability to develop their careers for themselves.



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SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll on behalf of EdAssist by Bright Horizons among 2,029 US adults aged 18 years or older, who are employed full-time or part-time. The survey was conducted from June 21-30, 2023.

Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, employment type, and household income to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. 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 + 2.9 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.