



**The American Workforce's Health Card: Well-Being and Career Trajectories**

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## **Abstract**

As the American workforce feels the power of the aftermath of a pandemic and the staggering economic distress resulting from inflation, workers' well-being and career trajectories remain a concern. Undeniably, the latter affects the working environment and carries societal and economic consequences. This white paper aims to examine and provide insights into American workers' well-being and their perceived career trajectory through the Conservation of Resources Theory lens and the tenets of Self-Efficacy. The data used to support these trends has been extracted from the University of Phoenix Career Institute (2023), in which 5,000 American workers comprised the sample and completed a survey. The resulting findings from the survey revealed that mental health remains a problem, mainly in younger generations and women. In addition, 53% of Americans are willing to pursue new career paths while remaining optimistic about the future.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
American Workers' Well-Being in 2023: The Struggle Is Real.....	2
The American Workforce: Trends in Career Trajectories .....	3
Conservation of Resources Theory and The Self-Efficacy Tenets.....	5
Conclusion .....	9
References.....	10

## Introduction

The literature on organizational stress and well-being has unveiled the toxic effect of work stress on employees' physical and emotional wellness (Yu et al., 2021). Employee well-being has been a ubiquitous societal concern since the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the Coronavirus a pandemic (Pereira-Sanchez et al., 2020). It is indispensable to accentuate that research studies have linked public-health disasters to deleterious effects on individuals' health (Holingue et al., 2020). According to the Career Institute (2023), American workers have experienced more burnout and mental health struggles in the last three years, causing workers' welfare to languish during the pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Equivalently to the Mental health pillar, examining American workers' career trajectories is instrumental in determining the working trends of the American workforce for three consecutive years after the pandemic wreaked havoc in the world (Career Institute, 2021, 2022, 2023). Noteworthy is mentioning that career trajectories or opportunities for career advancement may be associated with different aspects of an organization's working conditions and well-being. The projection of career trends in the US may assist in predicting our economy's future.

This white paper aims to examine and provide insights into American workers' well-being and their perceived career trajectory through the Conservation of Resources Theory lens and the tenets of Self-Efficacy. The Career Institute (2023) trends may deliver a glimpse of the American workforce health card. Furthermore, this analysis is vital to generating job satisfaction, employee work engagement, improving retention rates, and nurturing back to health the American workforce.

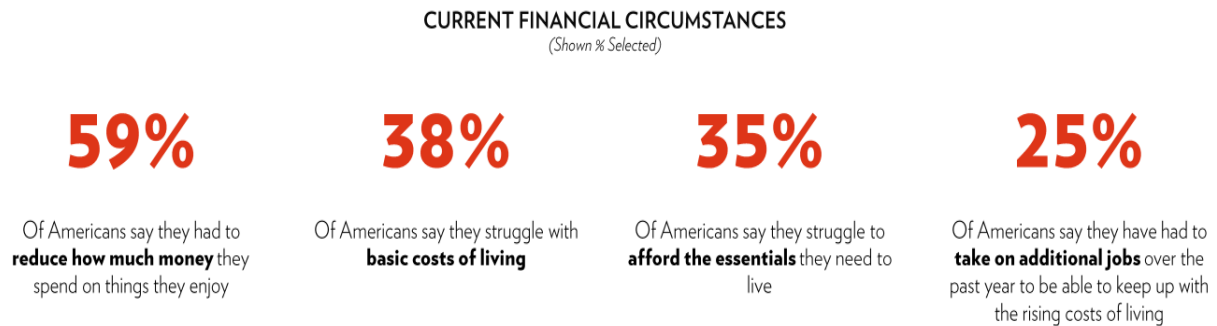
## **American Workers' Well-Being in 2023: The Struggle Is Real**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), well-being combines mental and physical health and manifests in mental and physical illness. Furthermore, well-being is associated with families, jobs, and other socioeconomic issues, including changes in productivity (CDC, n.d.). An employee's performance is crucial to an organization's success. It involves producing the goods, products, or services for the organization's survival, competitiveness, and goal achievement (Setyoko et al., 2022). The conditions in the workplace can positively or negatively affect employees' health, thus compromising workers' well-being (Adams, 2019). For that reason, the Career Institute (2021, 2022, 2023) has been tracking changes in wellness, and more specifically, changes in the mental health of the American workforce, after the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Career Institute (2023), in the aftermath of the pandemic, American workers feel stressed about their jobs and perceive their current occupations as toxic to their psychological health. In addition, the majority of workers (55%) reported work-related anxiety. Consequently, 39% have sought mental health resources (Career Institute, 2023). Other stressors impacting workers' mental health and well-being stem from inflation's high cost of living and cuts in family expenses related to leisure and enjoyable activities (Career Institute, 2023). In fact, 65 % of Americans lack savings or live paycheck to paycheck (Career Institute, 2023). Figure 1 portrays some of the stressors experienced by working Americans in 2023.

## Figure 1

### *Stressors Impacting the American Workforce Well-Being*



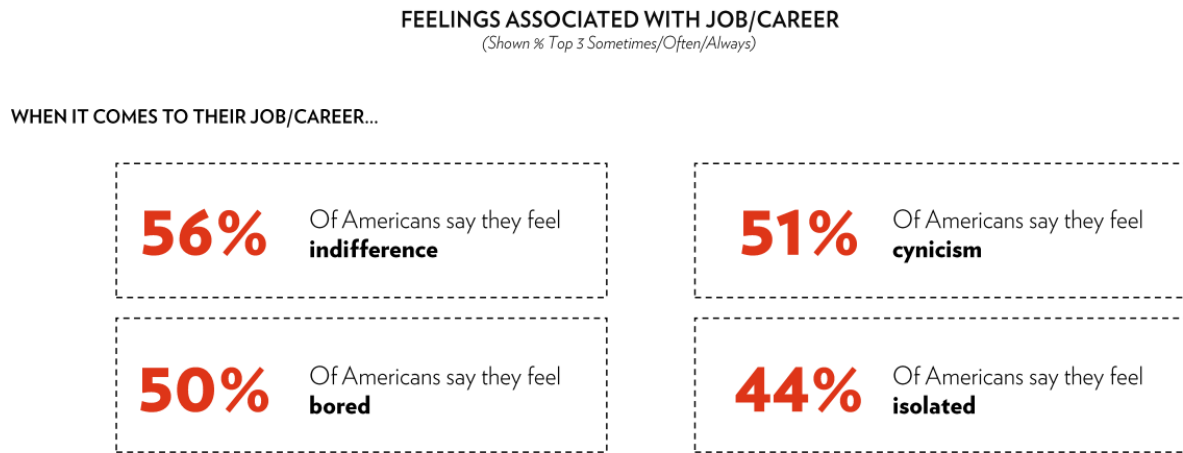
*Note:* The figure represents the American Workforce's financial struggles reported by the University of Phoenix Career Institute (2023).

### **The American Workforce: Trends in Career Trajectories**

Employees stay longer in their organizations when companies contribute to their career paths (Valdez & Limos-Galay, 2023). The American workforce values the trajectory of their jobs, and 81% remain optimistic about the future of their careers three years after COVID-19 was declared a world pandemic (Career Institute, 2023). However, this optimism is not founded on workers' perceptions of what employers could do for their career trajectory; positive views stem from workers' confidence in their skillsets, resilience, feelings of personal fulfillment, and determination to adapt to new situations to advance their careers (Career Institute, 2023). Despite this surge of optimism, half of the American workforce expressed indifference, cynicism, boredom, and isolation in their careers. These symptoms signal a profound discontent among workers. Figure 2 shows American workers' feelings associated with their careers.

## Figure 2

### *American Workers' Feelings Associated with their Careers*



*Note:* The figure represents Americans' feelings about their careers/jobs, as the University of Phoenix Career Institute (2023) data shows.

It is well-known that the progression of Americans' careers has been, in many cases, derailed (40% in 2022 and 34% in 2021) since the pandemic (Career Institute, 2021, 2022).

While it is clear that the pandemic may have precipitated these trends, it is possible that American workers' feelings about their careers, shown in Figure 2, existed before the pandemic. Perhaps, The Great Resignation, a term used after 4.3 million Americans quit their jobs in 2021, is a testament that Americans were unhappy with their careers long before the pandemic. While the quit rate has diminished from 2.9% in March 2022 to 2.5% in March 2023 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023), the figures are still alarming.

Issues, such as existing disconnects between workers and employers, as shown in the Career Institute (2023), may have been shaping the shifts in Americans' career trajectory trends. For example, the "Great Quit" forced US employers to face a different labor market, translating into the American workforce's willingness to quit their jobs before securing another (28% in

2022 and 30% in 2023) (Career Institute 2022, 2023). Employers cannot ignore changes in the labor market as more Americans continue to seek new career paths, and the number of workers pursuing new jobs increased from 52% in 2022 to 53% in 2023 (Career Institute, 2022, 2023). Consequently, the “Great Resignation” remains a reality for the American economy.

### **Conservation of Resources Theory and The Self-Efficacy Tenets**

Prioritizing and protecting employees’ mental health and well-being, most notably post-pandemic, requires empirical and theoretical solutions. Researchers have used the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) to understand adverse circumstances such as poverty, natural disasters, workplace stress, traumatic events, and burnout (Bardoel & Drago, 2021). Similarly, previous research has revealed the connection between self-efficacy, individuals’ well-being, and the ability to perform challenging tasks at work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019).

According to the COR, traumatic or stressful events can result in severe psychological distress as they threaten human beings with the loss of primary survival resources (Hobfoll et al., 2016). Furthermore, under the assumptions of COR, health is a valuable resource (Godinić & Obrenovic, 2020). Hence, the theory might be essential for adopting research-based approaches to improving the American Workforce’s health care and protecting the loss of resources employees value (Holmgreen et al., 2017).

A basic tenet of COR is that humans are inclined to safeguard, retain, and acquire diverse valued resources (Wu & Lee, 2020). According to Hobfoll (1989), resource loss generates stress. People must acquire and preserve essential psychological and material resources such as social support/connections to respond to and cope with stress effectively (Ojo et al., 2021). Since the pandemic started, the American workforce’s resources have been depleted. The economic distress following the Coronavirus caused a loss of income, job insecurity, loss of human lives,



connectivity, and loss of socialization (Godinić & Obrenovic, 2020). Social interaction is essential for sustaining physical and mental well-being, as social connectivity prevents loneliness (Goveas et al., 2022). The loss of this resource may cause anxiety, depression, cardiovascular diseases, and cognitive decline (Goveas et al., 2022). As the COR theory tenets have been previously applied to the problem of working under stress stemming from resource loss (Nemteanu et al., 2022), it may be beneficial if employers supply material and psychological resources (e.g., better pay and personal growth) to ameliorate the adverse effects of loss on American workers' well-being.

According to Bandura et al. (2001), many people's lives are spent on occupational activities, producing resources for one's livelihood. Work-related roles determine whether individuals perceive their work lives as relevant and fulfilling (Bandura et al., 2001). Bandura (1994) posited that self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about performing tasks optimally. In addition, Bandura (1978) also noted that perceived self-efficacy influences individuals' personal development and determines how much effort people will expend in the face of obstacles. Additionally, a heightened sense of self-efficacy could lead to better coping, thus reducing the levels of anxiety and depression (Ojo et al., 2021).

Job resources such as mentoring, upskilling, empowerment, and opportunities to advance were perceived as inefficient by the American workforce (Career Institute, 2023). The deprivation or loss of job resources such as these affects workers' performance, impacting self-efficacy and motivation. Data from the Career Institute (2023) revealed that as many as 40% of American workers are disengaged at work, 27% do not feel empowered, and 22% are dissatisfied with their jobs. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Americans do not perceive their

work-related lives as fulfilling; therefore, self-efficacy might be a missing ingredient in their career trajectories.

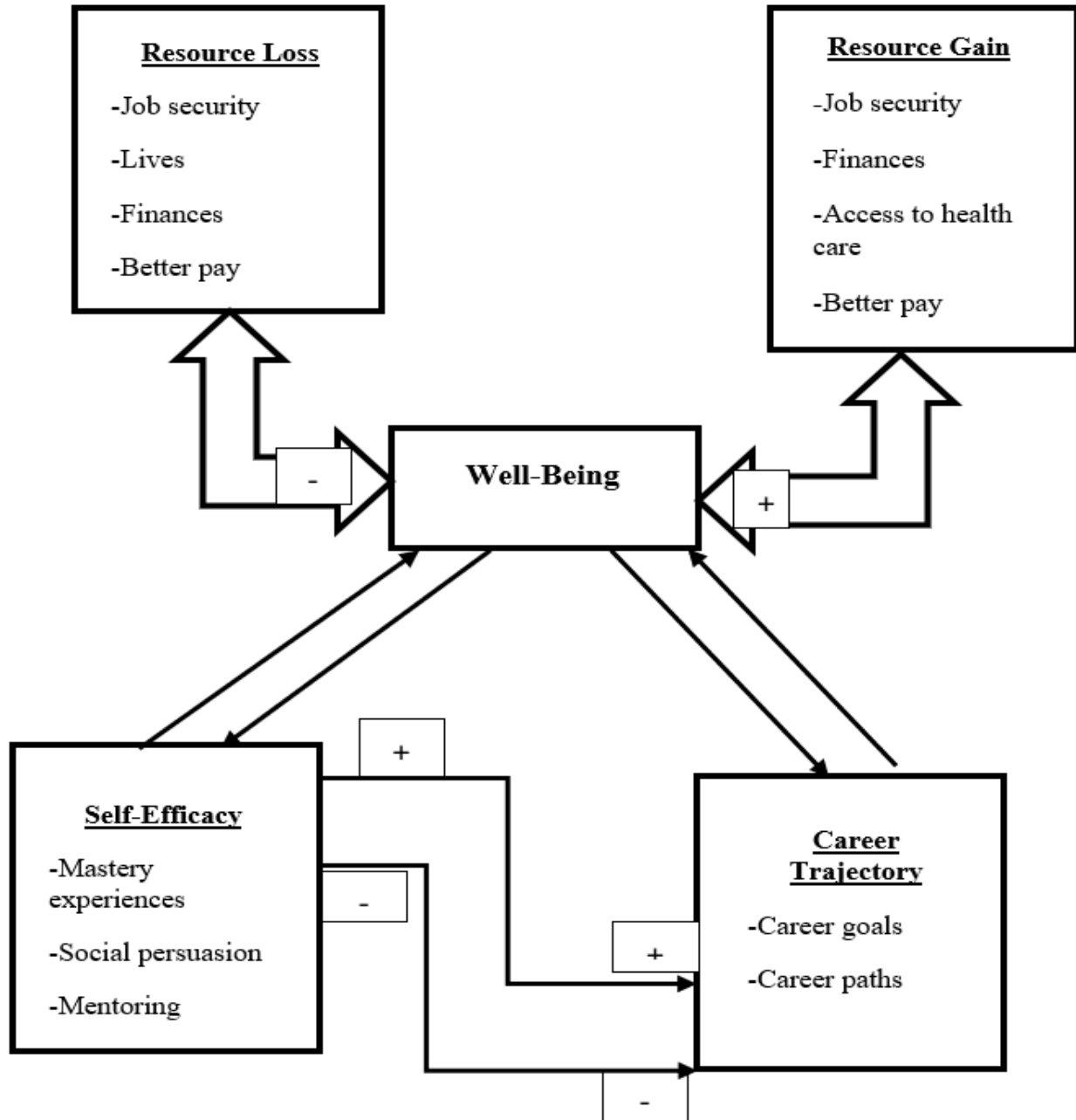
Bandura (1994) contended that self-efficacy can be accomplished through mastery experiences, social persuasion, and observation of role models. Mastery experiences, according to Bandura, refer to task mastery through clear evidence of achievement. Achievement or mastery of experiences can be attained if employers invest in employees' potential and desire to learn new skills. The previous statement is supported by the Career Institute (2023) evidence, showing that 70% of workers would be more likely to stay with their employers if provided with more opportunities to apply new skills.

According to the Career Institute (2023), 56% of Americans do not receive mentorship at work, and 19% stated they had been held back in their careers for this reason. Mentorship or work advocacy is related to the other two sources of self-efficacy: Social persuasion (respected individuals at work enforce and support our success at work) and observation of role models (observing others who accomplish work tasks).

The Conservation of Resources Theory and Self-Efficacy are theoretical constructs contributing to several studies on organizational well-being and stress. Figure 3 displays how the theories interplay with workers' well-being and career trajectories and shows how resource loss/gain negatively or positively impacts well-being. In the same vein, self-efficacy and well-being impact one another. For instance, workers experiencing low self-efficacy are more dissatisfied with their careers, disengaged, and prone to cynicism, burnout, and mental health issues. Namely, the lack of self-efficacy processes, such as providing workers with mastery experiences, social persuasion, and mentoring, may adversely affect workers' career trajectories.

**Figure 3**

*The COR Theory and Self-Efficacy: Workers' Well-Being and Career Trajectories*



*Note:* Figure 3 describes how the Conservation of Resources Theory and Self-Efficacy tenets are two significant forces in workers' well-being and career trajectories.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our society; such changes will most likely become the new norm. As a result, countries' socioeconomic development and workforce face insurmountable challenges (Søvold et al., 2021). Examining and providing insights into American workers' well-being and perceived career trajectory through proven scientific organizational stress theories is vital. As American workers experience more burnout, job dissatisfaction, a sense of loss, and an uncertain future for their careers, actions leading to our nation's workforce well-being should be adequate.

The data presented by the Career Institute (2023) reveals a disenchanting workforce. The American workforce is the pillar holding our economy strong; on that account, our nation's leaders and policymakers should improve American workers' health cards. Accordingly, it is vital to furnish workers with valuable physical and psychological resources that may yield positive changes in well-being and enhance career trajectory outcomes. Taking steps toward improving the American workforce's psychological and physical well-being will have a long-lasting effect on employee engagement, job satisfaction, and workers' quality of life and, thus, society in general.

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