



CAREER OPTIMISM INDEX®



University of Phoenix®

University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025 Study

Survey of U.S. Workers and Employers
April 2025





Survey Objectives

- Research study to examine American Workers' sense of optimism about their careers in the context of workplace, economic, and societal trends and challenges.
- Additional insights from Employers to provide comparison between the workforce and those who hire, train, and retain them.
- First conducted among Workers in 2021, Employers added in 2022; the report includes year-over-year tracking data for both audiences, where applicable.



Survey Methodology and Sample Definitions

- 20-minute, online survey among:
 - Total Workforce: n=5,005 US, nationally representative adults, age 18+, who either currently work or wish to be working (MOE $\pm 1.39\%$)
 - Employers: n=500 US Employers who are influential or play a critical role in hiring and workplace decisions within a range of departments, company sizes, and industries (MOE $\pm 4.38\%$)
- Workforce and Employer fieldwork was conducted between December 17, 2024 – January 13, 2025



Analysis Shown in This Report

- American Workers – This report reflects analysis of the Workforce audience of 5,005 US adults and includes year-over-year shifts for tracked questions. Throughout the report, there are several demographic and psychographic data call-outs to help readers understand the differences between various types of workers among the broader audience.
- Employers – The report also includes data for 500 Employers.
- There are several call-outs for demographic differences throughout the report; additional demographic data is available upon request.



Overview



Overview of Findings



Executive Summary

In a time of record-low institutional trust and growing workplace grievances, American workers are facing a crisis of autonomy.

- Nearly a quarter of Americans say their sense of control over their professional future has gotten worse over the past five years (21%), contributing to over half the population feeling burnt out (51%)— a record high for the Index.

Hope has become a coping mechanism against this backdrop of deepening workplace discontent.

- 76% of workers rely on it just to get through the year.
- However, hope alone cannot counteract workers' growing anxiety over the future of their careers.

Executive Summary

This challenge has reached a critical juncture, demanding immediate attention from employers to ensure a resilient workforce for the next five years of work and beyond.

The Business Imperative: Skilling as a Solution – The Index identifies a clear link between restoring workers' sense of autonomy and decreasing burnout:

- Workers who lack control over the future of their careers are 56% more likely to experience burnout than those who do feel in control (70% vs. 45%).

One of the most effective ways employers can restore workers' sense of control is to focus on career development opportunities within the workplace.

- Workers are 52% more likely to experience burnout when they feel they are not progressing in their careers at the right pace (67% vs. 44%).
- Workers are less likely to feel disengaged (43% vs. 52%) and are significantly more motivated (+38pts) and adaptable (+14pts) in their careers if they feel their current job provides them with opportunities for career development.

Executive Summary

However, many employers continue to prioritize external hiring over internal workforce investment, despite workers' desire to progress:

- 60% of employers prefer hiring new employees over training current staff, despite research indicating the significant cost of turnover, and the proven impact of talent development on retention rates and profitability.
- 86% of workers are actively seeking skill development opportunities, yet employer investment in reskilling and upskilling has declined by 13 and 10 points, respectively, since 2022.
- 43% of workers report a lack of access to necessary training—an 8-point increase since 2021.

Executive Summary

AI Tools and Training: Accelerating Growth, Autonomy, and Resilience – While internal talent investments are declining, the Index illustrates the workforce’s growing desire to embrace AI tools and training in expediting their career advancement and improving their overall engagement at work:

- AI could be a game-changer for workers, 56% say AI accelerates skill development and 79% say it helps close knowledge gaps.
- Workers who use AI see gains in autonomy (+12pts), resilience (+5pts), and adaptability (+5pts) compared to non-users.
- AI is also improving work-life balance (81%) and productivity (89%, +4 pts YoY)—which bolster mental health. Those who feel they are progressing in their career at the right pace report lower levels of burnout (44% vs. 67%).

Employers similarly recognize the value of AI to their workforce and businesses:

- 68% of employers say knowledge of how to use AI is valuable for their employees’ careers.
- 61% say they would prioritize hiring job candidates with AI training or experience, even if the candidate doesn’t have the traditional skills for a role.



A Workforce in Crisis



In a time of record-low institutional trust and growing workplace grievances, American workers are facing a crisis of autonomy.

Nearly a quarter of Americans say their sense of control has worsened over the past five years, contributing to record-high burnout

Career Control and Burnout

(Shown % Bottom 2 Has Become Worse; Top 2 Agree)

- Higher among Women (24%) than Men (19%)
- Higher among White (23%) Americans than Latinx (17%) and Black (13%) Americans
- Higher among people living in rural areas (27%) than suburban (20%) and urban (19%)

21%

Of Americans say their sense of control over their career has **gotten worse over the past five years**

Contributing to....

- Higher among Gen Z (61%) and Millennials (57%) than Gen X (50%) and Boomer (36%)

51%

Of Workers feeling **burnt out at work**

2024: 48%
2023: 47% Δ **+4**

* Significant differences are indicated by **orange text representing decreases** or **blue italicized text representing increases**

Δ Indicates Wave-over-Wave Shift

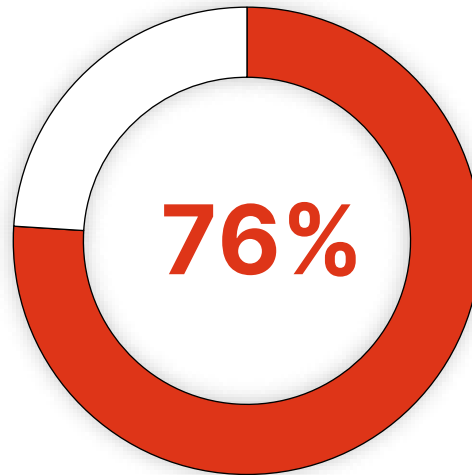


Hope has become a coping mechanism against a backdrop of deepening workplace discontent

Americans' Reliance on Hope

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

2024: 74%
2023: 73%
2022: 73%
2021: 70% Δ *+6*



Of Americans say they have relied on hope to get through the past year

However, hope alone cannot counteract workers' growing anxiety over the future of their careers.

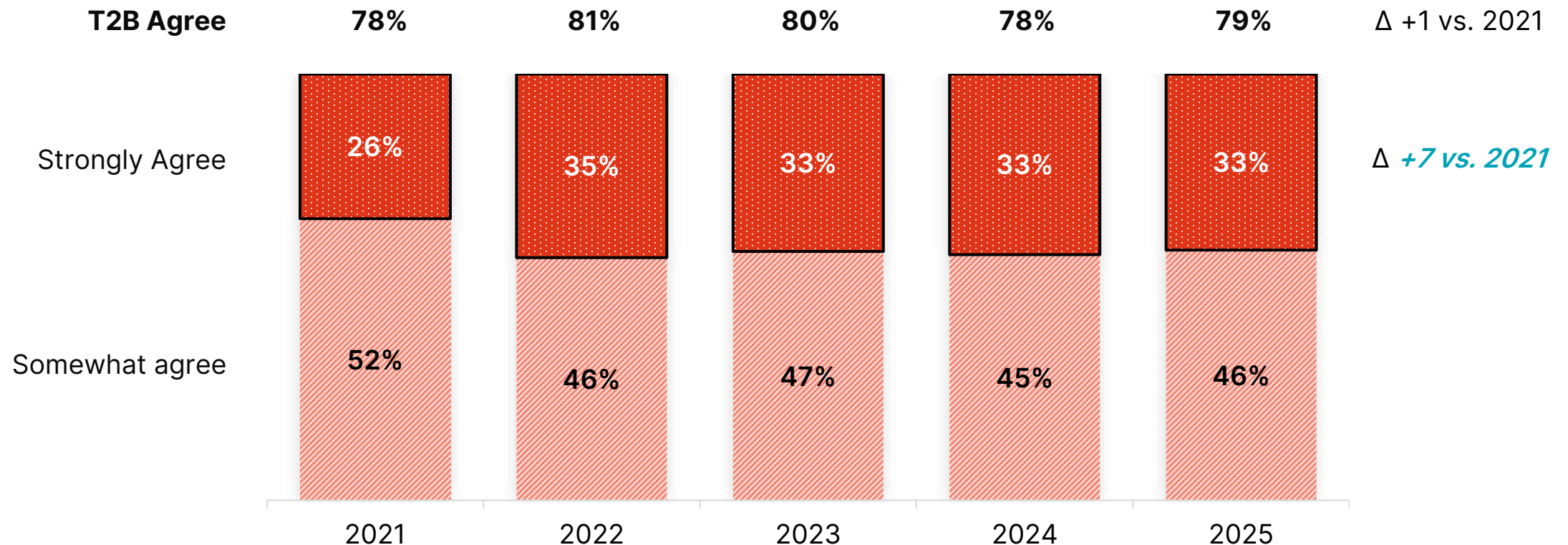
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Δ Indicates Wave-over-Wave Shift



Despite this challenge, optimism has strengthened over the past five years, with more Americans looking to the future with hope

"I am hopeful about the future of my career"
(Shown % Selected)



* Significant differences are indicated by **orange text representing decreases** or **blue italicized text representing increases**

Δ Indicates Wave-over-Wave Shift



Career optimism is rooted in job security, growth opportunities, and personal fulfillment

What Optimism Means to Them (Shown Open-end Responses)

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

“Having optimism about my career means finding employment where I am valued and there are **opportunities for professional growth**.” – Male, Gen X

“Optimism means **believing in growth opportunities**, feeling motivated by challenges, and trusting in my potential to achieve career fulfillment.” – Female, Millennial

“Optimism can mean that you have hope in finding a new job or **finding opportunities for growth and improvement** within your current job.” – Male, Gen Z

JOB SECURITY

“Having optimism means having a **stable workplace** that values me as an individual.” Non-binary, Gen Z

“It would mean **job security**, lack of threat from AI and outsourcing, consistent upskilling, and no fear of layoffs.” – Male, Millennial

“**Job security** and the feeling I am not being replaced anytime soon.” – Female, Gen X

ENJOYMENT AND FULLFILLMENT

“Having optimism means being able to go to work without feeling like I am going to work. Work is a place that I **enjoy being at and get fulfillment out of what I do**.” – Male, Gen X

“Optimism in my career is linked to **finding purpose in my work**. It's about believing that my efforts contribute to something.” – Female, Millennial

“Having optimism about my job means waking up everyday and **genuinely being happy because I am reporting to a job that I enjoy**.” – Female, Gen Z



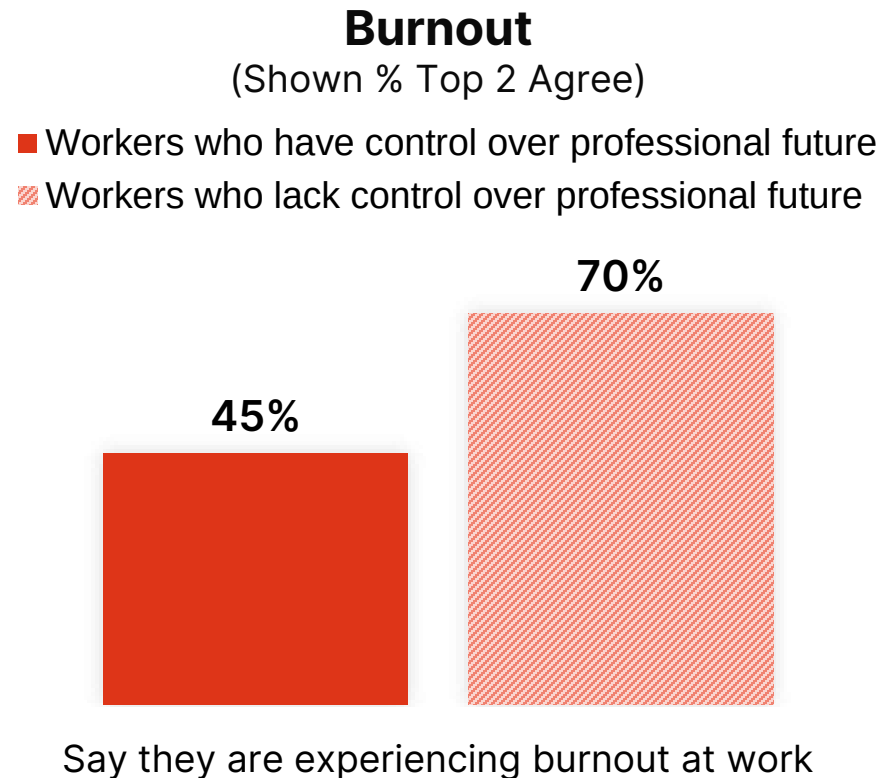
The Business Imperative: Skills as a Solution



There is a clear link between restoring workers' sense of autonomy, strengthened by workplace growth opportunities, and decreasing burnout.



Workers who lack control over the future of their career are more likely to experience burnout



Workers who lack control over their professional future are

56%

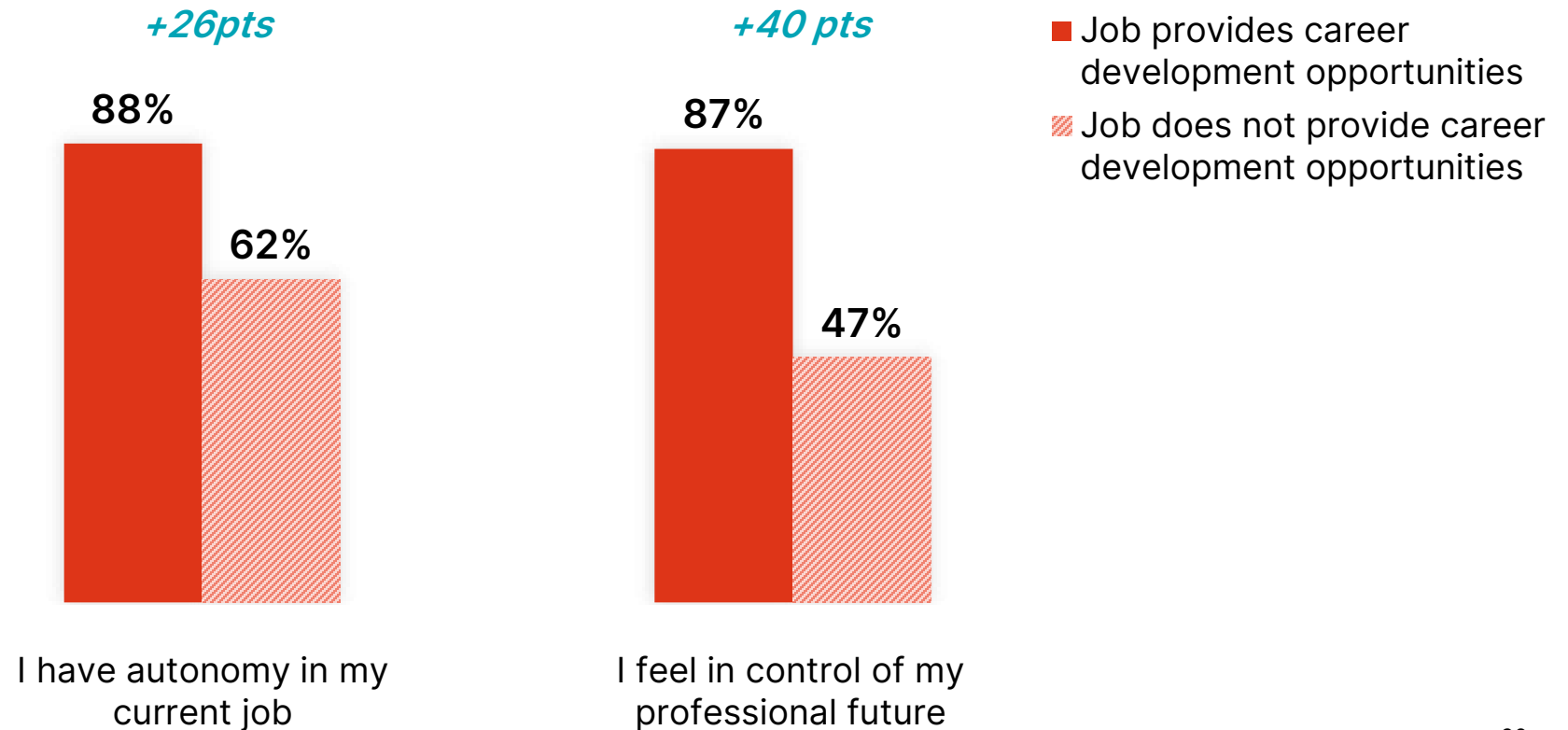
more likely to experience burnout than those who feel they have control



Employers can restore workers' sense of control by focusing on career development opportunities within the workplace

Autonomy and Control in Career

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



* Significant differences are indicated by orange text representing significantly lower or blue italicized text representing significantly higher



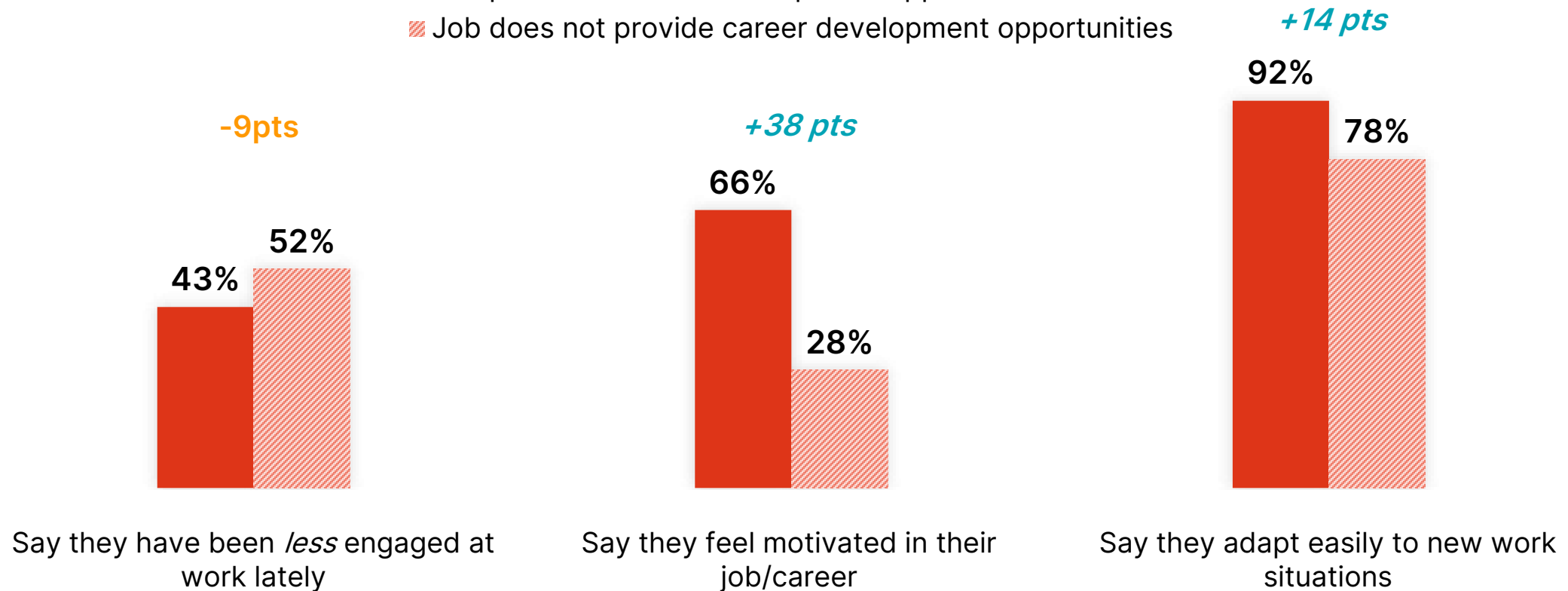
In turn, career development opportunities enhance worker resilience, fostering greater engagement, motivation, and adaptability

Engagement, Motivation, and Adaptability

(Shown % Top 2 Agree; Top 2 Often/Always)

■ Job provides career development opportunities

▨ Job does not provide career development opportunities



* Significant differences are indicated by **orange text representing significantly lower** or **blue italicized text representing significantly higher**

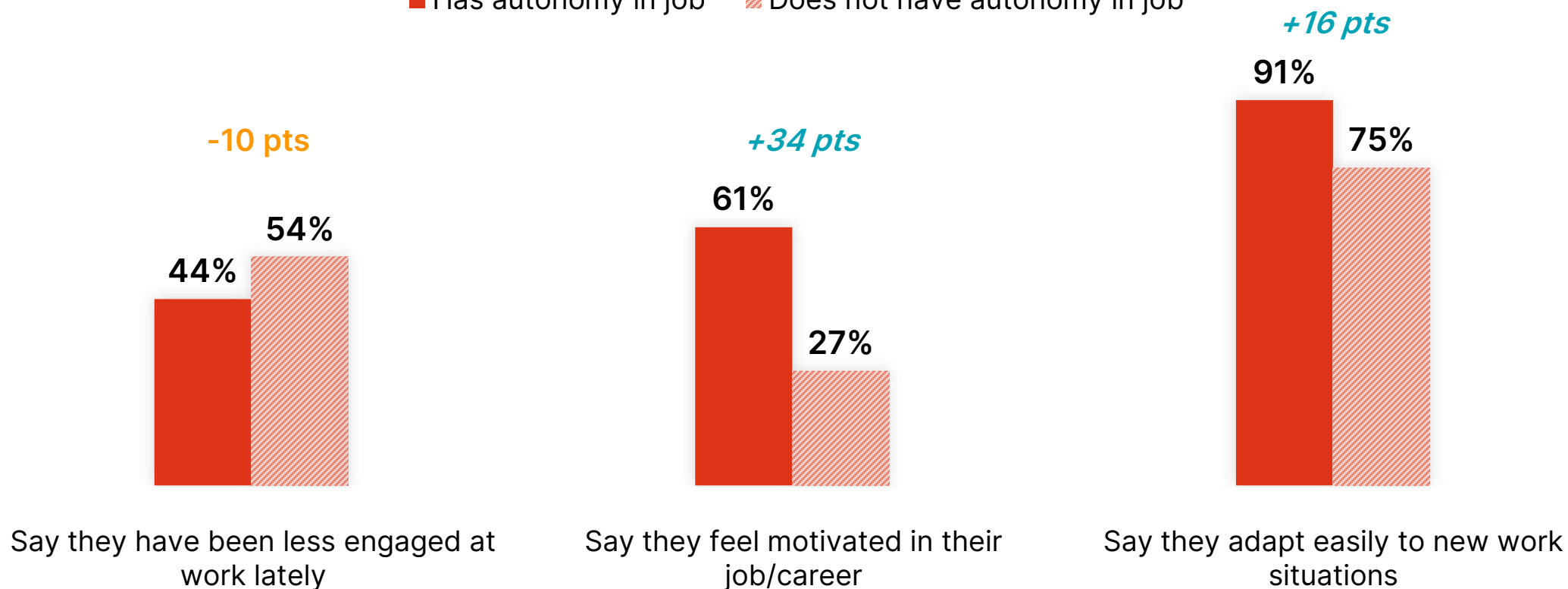


Greater autonomy at work also reduces disengagement while boosting motivation and adaptability

Disengagement, Motivation, and Adaptability

(Shown % Top 2 Agree; Top 2 Often/Always)

■ Has autonomy in job ▨ Does not have autonomy in job



* Significant differences are indicated by **orange text representing significantly lower** or **blue italicized text representing significantly higher**



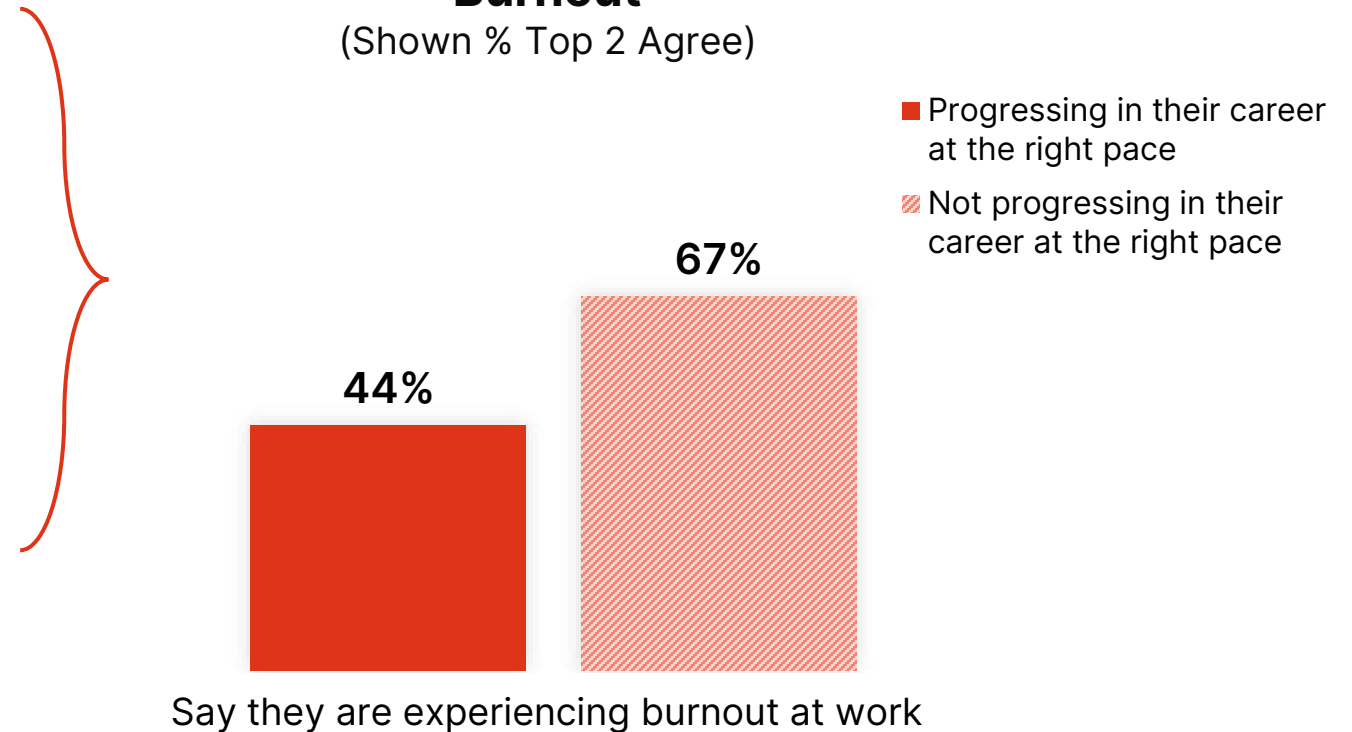
When workers can progress in their careers at their desired pace, they are less prone to burnout

Workers who feel they are progressing in their careers at the right pace are

34%

less likely to experience burnout than those who don't feel they are progressing

Burnout
(Shown % Top 2 Agree)





A Costly Disconnect



Despite clear desire from workers to continue developing their skills, most Employers are investing less in skilling compared to last year and hiring externally instead.



Employers often favor external hires over developing their existing employees—overlooking a vital opportunity

60%

Of Employers say they would rather hire someone new than train existing employees when looking for talent with specific skills

Despite research¹ indicating the **significant cost of turnover** and the proven impact² of **talent development on retention** rates and profitability.

¹ Gallup, *42% of Employee Turnover Is Preventable but Often Ignored*.

² Gallup, *Improve Work Performance With a Focus on Employee Development*.

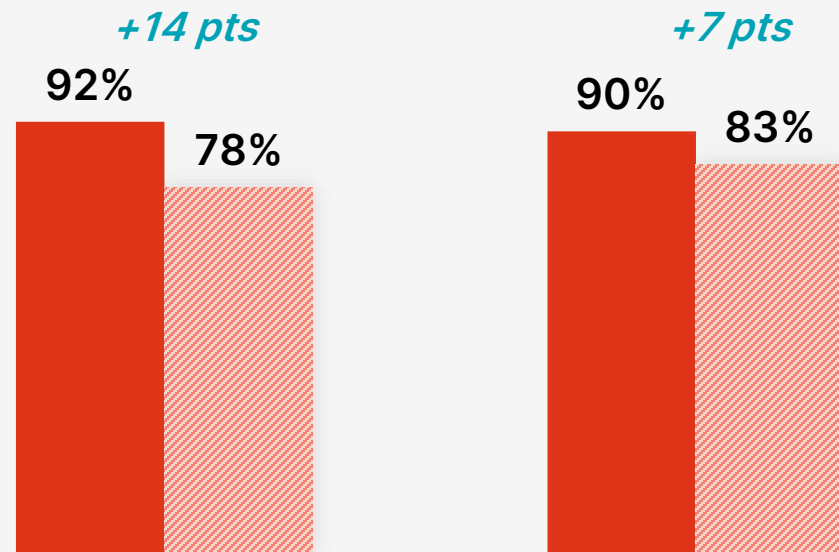


However, the benefits are clear – workers who receive upskilling and reskilling opportunities feel more adaptable in their careers

Impact of Upskilling on Adaptability

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

- Receives upskilling opportunities weekly/monthly
- ▨ Never receives upskilling opportunities



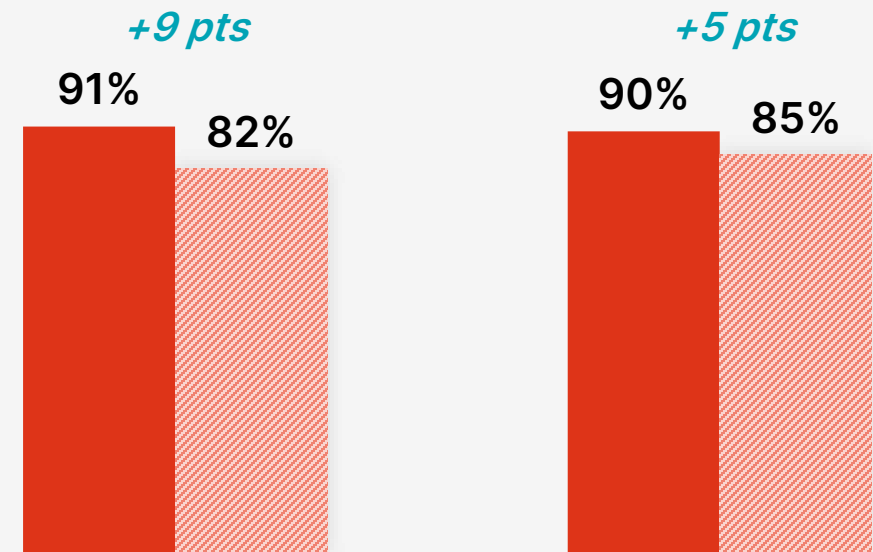
Say they feel confident they can adapt and learn new skills to keep up with changes in their industry

Say they adapt easily to new work situations

Impact of Reskilling on Adaptability

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

- Receives reskilling opportunities weekly/monthly
- ▨ Never receives reskilling opportunities

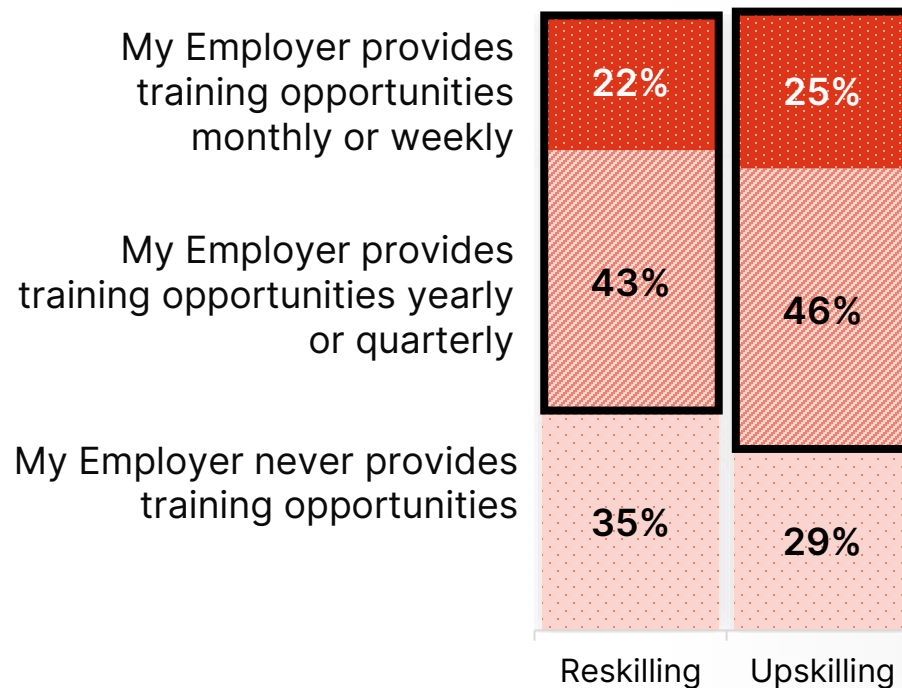


Say they feel confident they can adapt and learn new skills to keep up with changes in their industry

Say they adapt easily to new work situations

Despite clear benefits and rising demand, Employers are pulling back on reskilling and upskilling efforts

Employer Provided Training Opportunities
(Shown % Selected)



Reskilling and upskilling opportunities are down **13 points and 10 points**, respectively, since 2022

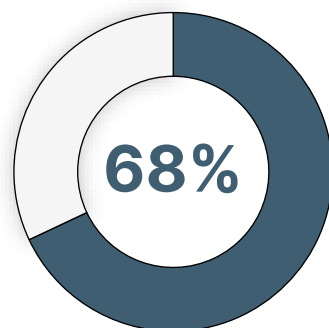
Employers are more likely than Workers to say they offer **any reskilling (85%) and upskilling (92%)** opportunities to their employees, though this is down **10 points and 5 points**, respectively, since 2022



At the same time, hiring and retaining workers remains a persistent challenge for Employers

Concern Over Turnover Rate

(Shown % Top 3 Concerned)

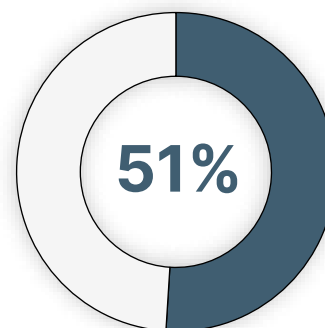


Of Employers are concerned about the current turnover rate at their company

2024: 65%
2023: 74%
2022: 76% Δ -8

Difficulty Finding New Talent

(Shown % Top 2 Difficult)

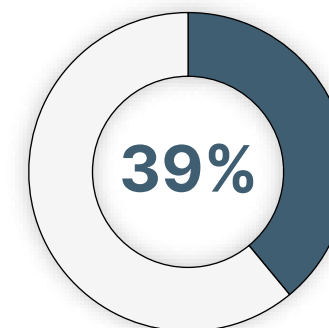


Of Employers say it has been difficult to find new talent in the past year

2024: 56%
2023: 60% Δ -9

Increase in Turnover Rate

(Shown % Top 2 Higher)



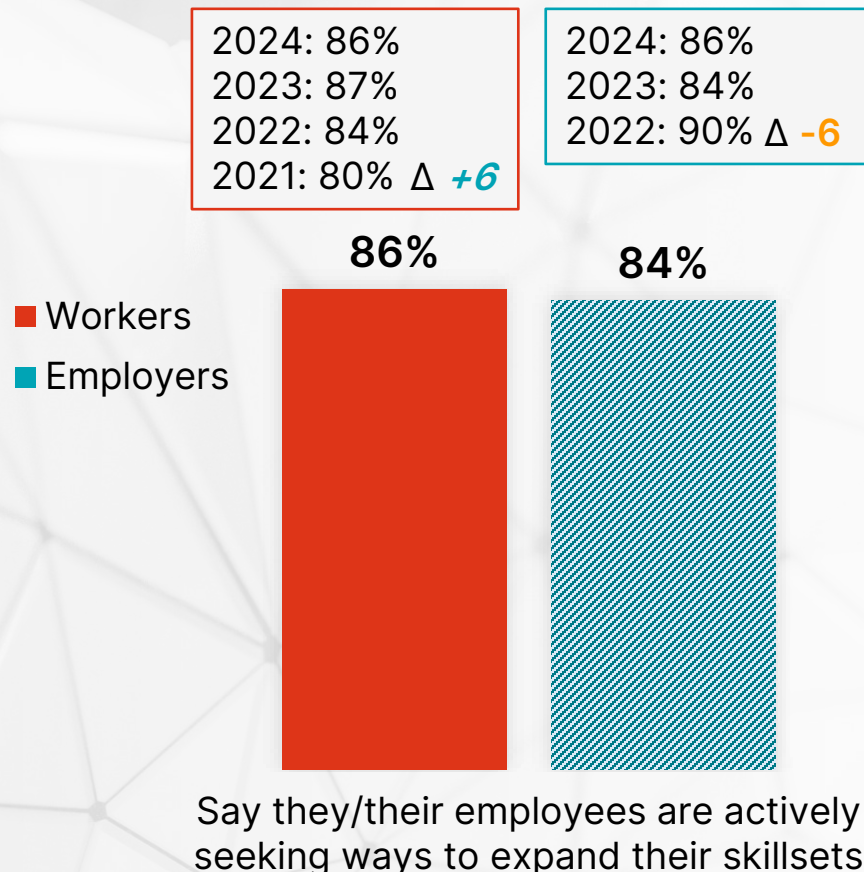
Of Employers say the turnover rate at their company is higher than the previous year

2024: 43%
2023: 54%
2022: 55% Δ -16

This mismatch is particularly stark given workers' growing appetite for development

Desire to Increase Skills

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



71%

Of Workers say they need to improve their skillset in order to advance in their career

2024: 66% Δ +5

- Higher among Gen Z (79%) and Millennials (78%) than Gen X (70%) and Boomers (54%)
- Higher among Black (82%), Asian (76%) and Latinx (75%) Americans than White (67%) Americans
- Higher among White-Collar Workers (74%) vs. Blue-Collar Workers (68%)
- Higher among Hybrid (77%) Workers than Remote (71%) and In-Person (66%) Workers
- Higher among people living in urban (77%) areas than suburban (69%) and rural (65%)

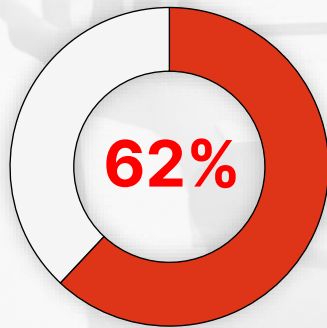
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Δ Indicates Wave-over-Wave Shift

Many workers report limited access to training opportunities and need support

Need Support Learning New Skills

(Shown % Top 2 Need Any Support)

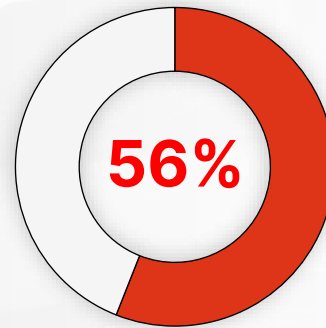


Of Americans say they need support in learning new skills

2024: 61%
2023: 62%
2022: 58% Δ +4

Need Support Finding Education / Training Programs

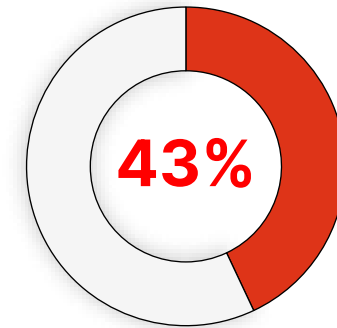
(Shown % Top 2 Need Any Support)



Of Americans say they need support seeking out education or training programs that will get them ahead in their chosen field

Lack of Access to Skills Development

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



Of Americans say they do not have access to opportunities to develop the skills they need to advance in their career

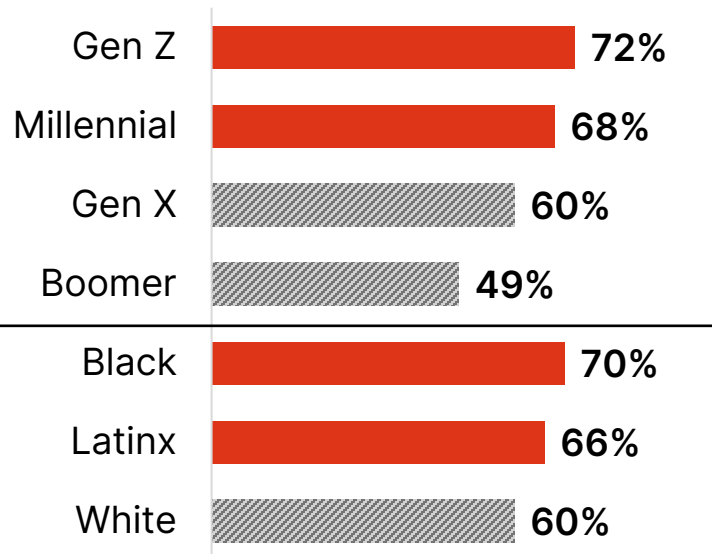
2024: 39%
2023: 37%
2022: 41%
2021: 35% Δ +8

Employers agree with 46% saying their employees lack access to these opportunities

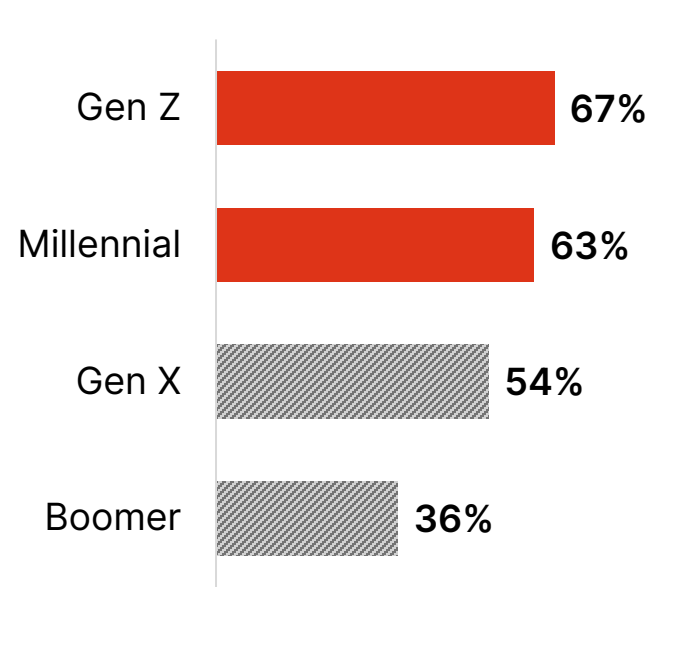


Younger generations, as well as Black and Latinx Americans, express a heightened need for support in learning new skills and accessing training programs

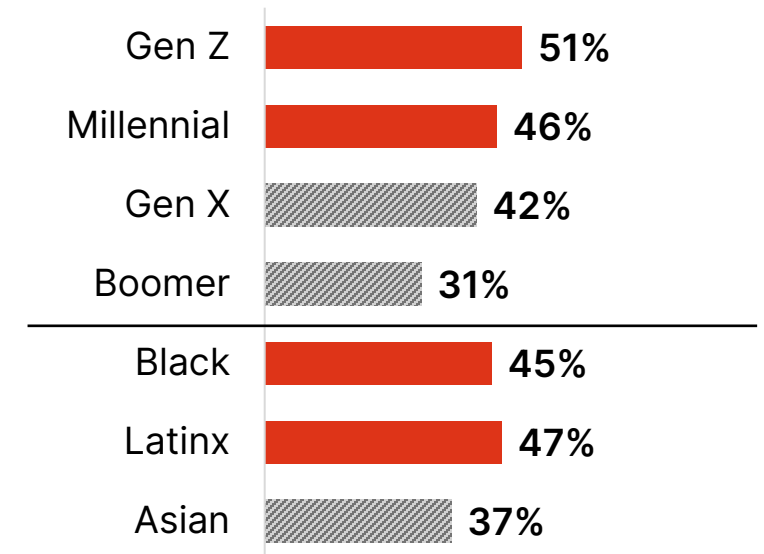
Need Support in Learning New Skills



Need Support Seeking out Education or Training Programs to Get Ahead in Chosen Field



Do Not Have Access to Skills Development Opportunities





Employers cite lack of time, budget constraints, and external hiring as top barriers to investing in skills development

Employers' Reasons for Not Investing in Reskilling or Upskilling

(Shown % Selected, Showing Top 10 Most Selected)





AI Tools and Training: Accelerating Growth, Autonomy, and Resilience



While internal talent investments are declining, workers are embracing AI tools and training in expediting their career advancement and improving their overall engagement at work.



AI can help Employers close the skills gap among their employees

AI's Impact on Skills Development (Shown % Top 2 Agree)

79%

Of Workers who use AI say that it **helps close knowledge gaps**

- Higher among Men (81%) than Women (75%)
- Higher among people in urban (83%) areas than suburban (76%) and rural (74%)

56%

Of Americans say AI helps **accelerate skill development**

- Higher among Gen Z (62%) and Millennials (63%) than Gen X (55%) and Boomer (40%)
- Higher among Asian (68%), Latinx (67%), and Black (65%) Americans than White (50%) Americans
- Higher among people living in urban (63%) areas than suburban (53%) and rural (50%)

54%

Of Americans say AI allows them to **explore and pursue different career paths more easily**

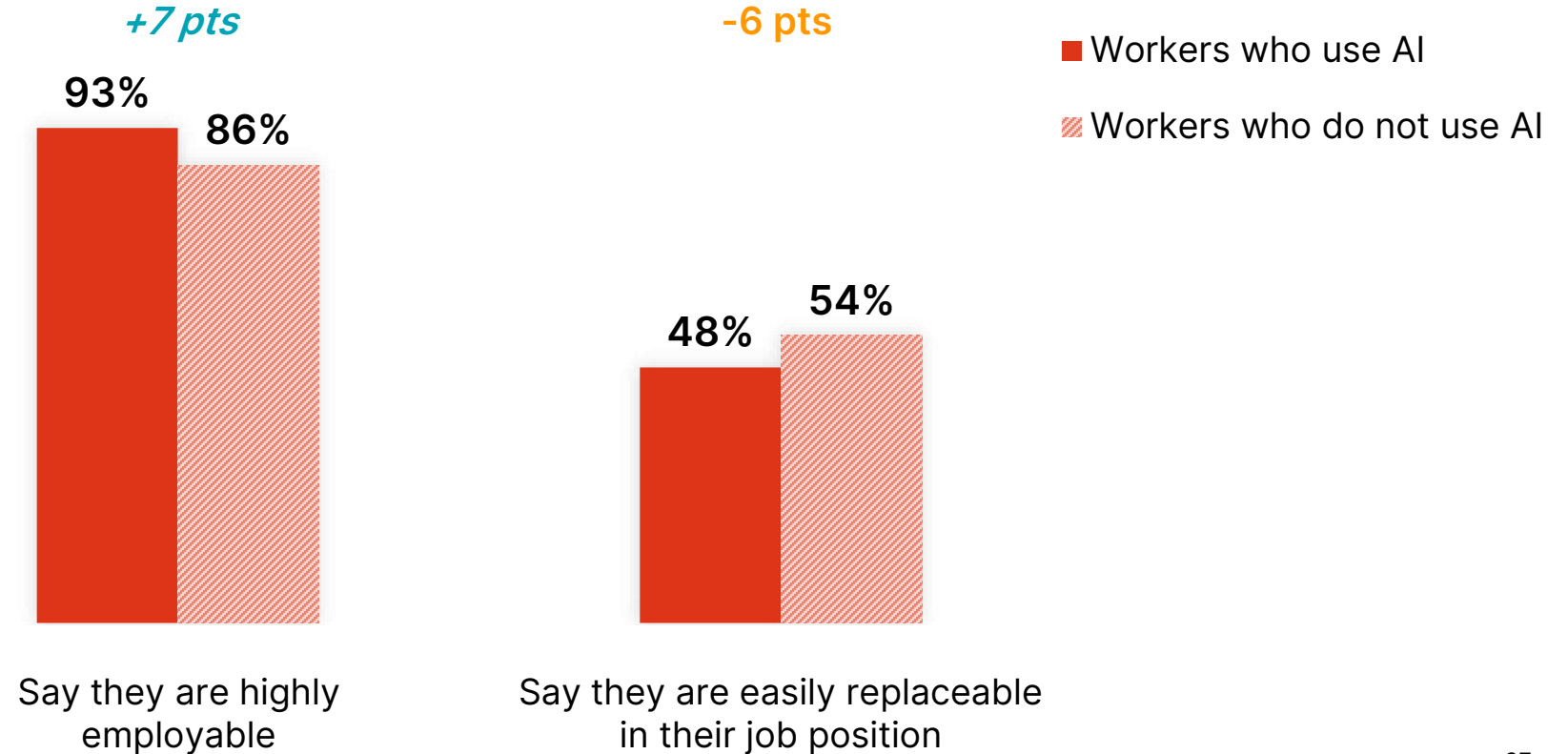
- Higher among Men (57%) than Women (51%)
- Higher among Gen Z (61%) and Millennials (61%) than Gen X (53%) and Boomer (40%)
- Higher among Asian (65%), Black (65%) and Latinx (64%) Americans than White (49%) Americans
- Higher among people living in urban (62%) areas than suburban (52%) and rural (48%)



Workers who use AI feel more employable and less replaceable in their jobs

Employability and Job Security

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



* Significant differences are indicated by **orange text representing significantly lower** or **blue italicized text representing significantly higher**

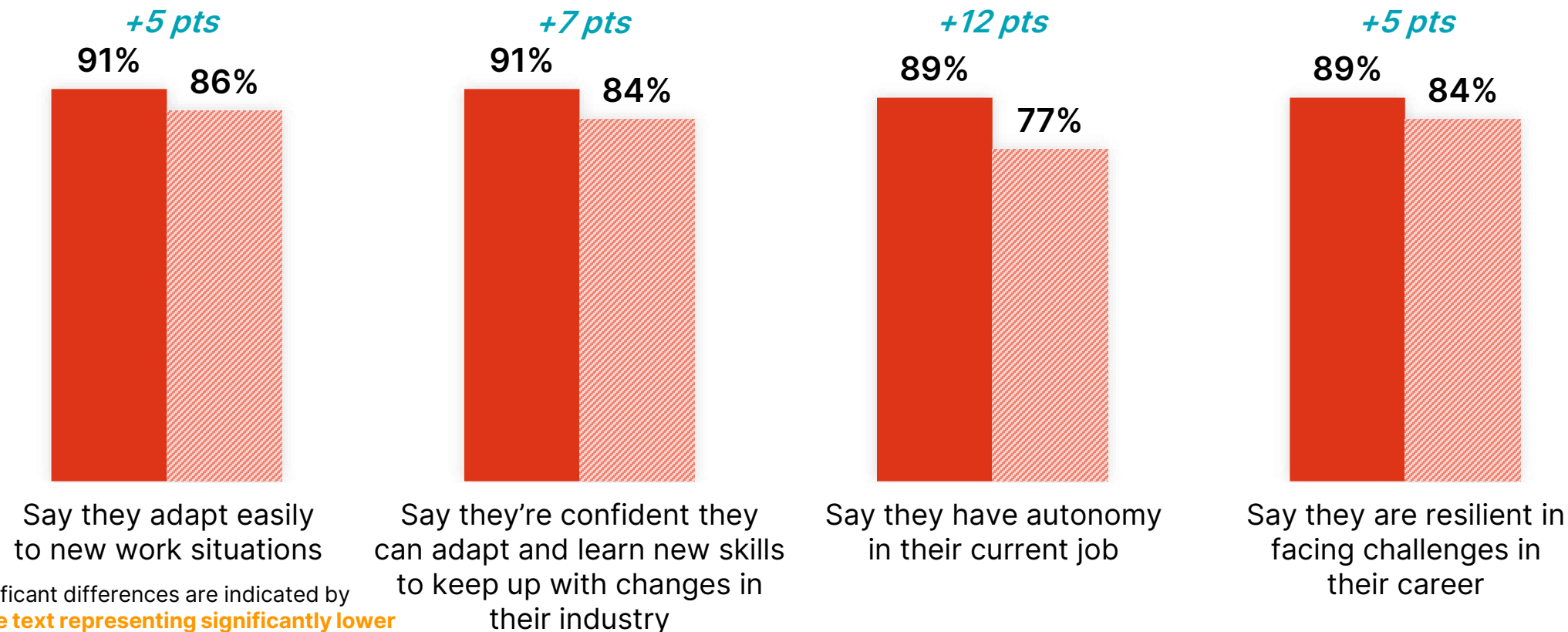


AI adoption also boosts worker autonomy, resilience, and adaptability

Adaptability, Autonomy, and Resilience

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

■ Workers who use AI ■ Workers who do not use AI



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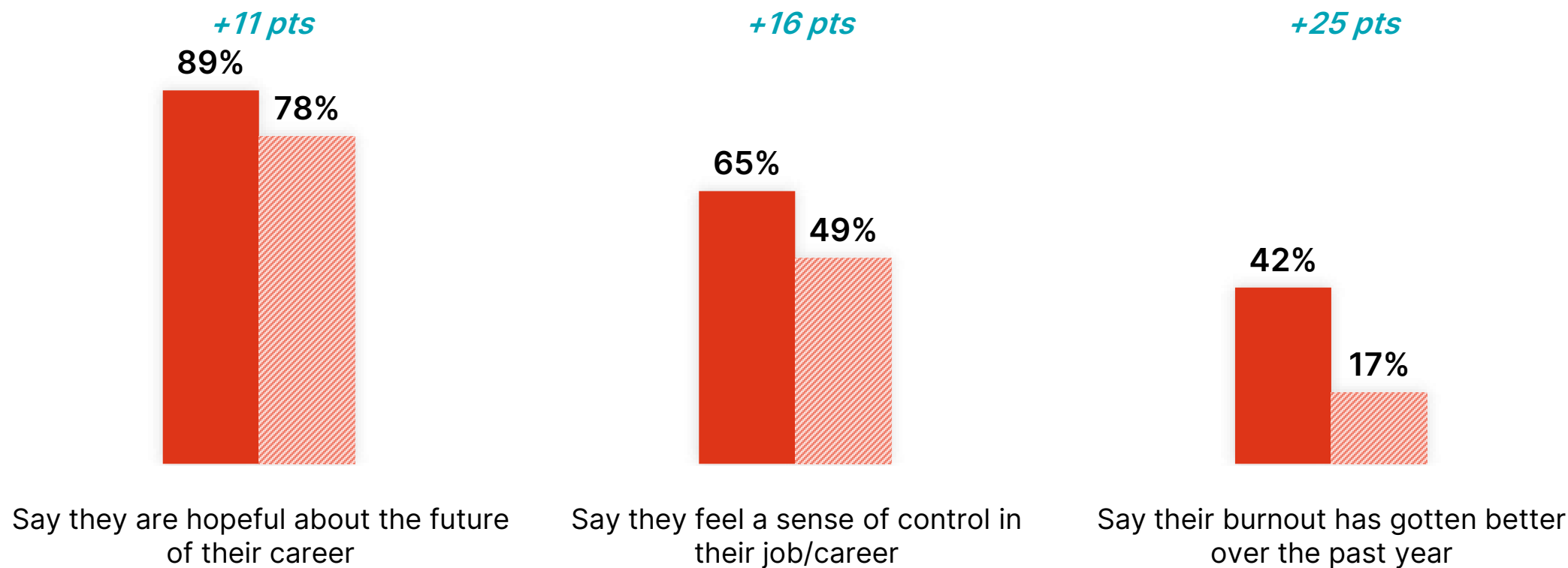


Using AI strengthens career optimism and sense of control, while reducing burnout among workers

Hope, Control, and Burnout

(Shown % Top 2 Agree; Top 2 Often/Always; Top 2 Has Become Better)

■ Workers who use AI ■ Workers who do not use AI



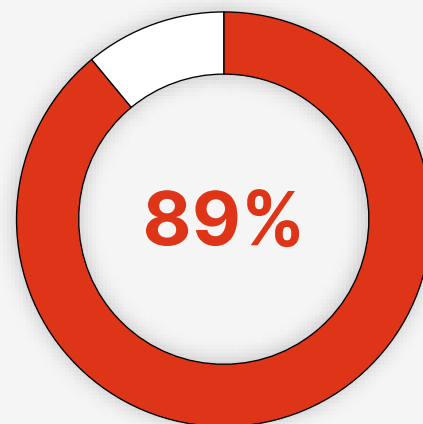
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And AI helps workers achieve better work-life balance and productivity

AI's Impact on Productivity

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



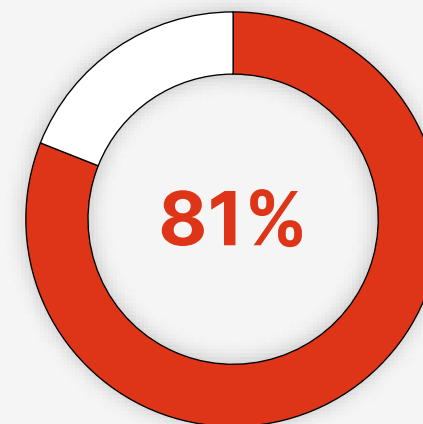
2024: 85% Δ *+4*

Of Workers state that using AI to assist them in completing their work has improved their productivity

- Higher among Men (91%) than Women (86%)
- Higher among people living in urban areas (92%) than suburban (87%) and rural (84%)

AI's Impact on Work-Life Balance

(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



2024: 81% Δ +/-0

Of Workers believe that using AI to assist them in completing their work has improved their work-life balance

- Higher among Latinx (86%) Americans than White (79%) Americans
- Higher among Hybrid Workers (83%) than In-person Workers (77%)
- Higher among people living in urban areas (84%) than suburban (78%) and rural (74%)

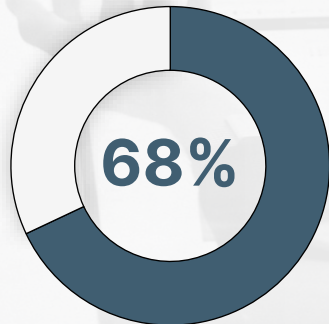
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Δ Indicates Wave-over-Wave Shift

AI presents a pivotal opportunity for Employers: but while many acknowledge its value, few are actively empowering workers to develop AI skills

Value of AI in Employees' Careers

(Shown % Top 2 Very/Extremely Valuable)

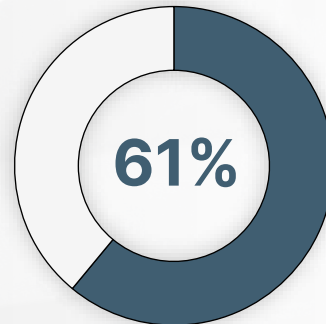


Of Employers say knowledge of how to use AI is valuable for their employees' careers

2024: 62% Δ +6

Prioritization of AI Skills in Hiring

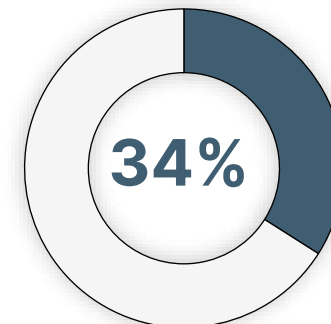
(Shown % Top 2 Agree)



Of Employers say they would prioritize hiring job candidates with AI training / experience even if they don't have the traditional skills for a role over those who don't have AI training / experience

Employer-provided AI Training

(Shown % Selected 'Currently Offered')



Of Employers say they currently offer their employees training on how to use AI in their career

2024: 29% Δ +5

30% of Employers say they're going to offer AI training to their employees soon

* Significant differences are indicated by **orange text representing decreases** or **blue italicized text representing increases**

Δ Indicates Wave-over-Wave Shift